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# The Relationship Between Authors and Young Readers: A Small Miracle Happens When a Child Loves a Book

BY DAVID L HARRISON

*"The words have a rhythm to them. I can hear the beat in my head. Then when I get it down I read it out loud to myself."*

—Letter from a boy

A 6-year-old girl was given a new book (Harrison, 2000). She sat on her mother's lap and listened to the story over and over. She read it silently to herself. She read it aloud. She asked an adult friend to sit down and listen to her read her new story. She asked the adult to take turns reading with her. The little girl loved the words so much that she began acting out some of the parts, leaping and waving her arms and dancing in exuberant interpretations of what she heard and felt and saw in her imagination. The following morning she took the book to school. There she organized her classmates into teams. As the book was read aloud, the children performed the girl's choreographed movements.

## The Power of Words

This is one of those small miracles that happen when a child loves a book. The girl imbued the characters in her new book with her own personality. Henceforth they would march to her rhythm. The words in the storybook were still the author's, but the joy of discovery and interpretation belonged to the child. She became the director of the story.

In some ways, authors are like that old scalawag the Wizard of Oz, hiding behind his curtain, punching strobe lights, blowing smoke screens, and pretending to be a wizard. We stand behind the curtain of our words, inventing characters, tormenting them with problems, and setting them off down their own yellow brick roads looking for answers. In the end, our characters generally find what they seek. Young readers want and need reading experiences that keep them coming back for more.

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*Editor's note: This article is based on one previously published by the International Reading Association Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group in its journal, The Dragon Lode.*

## How Do Authors Learn How to Write?

When I earned my living as a research scientist, I spent the day observing, measuring, and recording. When I began writing books for children, I learned that research for a writer is not so easily quantified. Words, which had never before been a concern, suddenly became my stock in trade, my power base, my obsession, and my greatest worry. I read a quote by James Slezak: "The words you use and choose not to use do not merely describe reality, they create it." How could I observe, measure, and record language necessary to guarantee success? The answer, I soon discovered, was the oldest form of research known: Trial and Error.

Most of us who write for young people learn on the job. Apprentices in a complex, demanding industry, we stumble through manuscript after manuscript until eventually an editor gives us that long dreamed of first big break, or we lose heart and wander off to do something else with our lives. (My own apprenticeship lasted through 97 months and 152 submissions.) Those who become writers discover that to reach our readers we must first convince a

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tough crowd of critics—assistant editors, editors, editorial directors, marketing people, sales people, publishers, librarians, teachers, book store buyers, and parents—that this time we got it right.

I have no quarrel with this system. Columnist William Tammeus speaks straight to the point of getting it right. He guesses that for every one thousand who set out to become writers, perhaps one, on his or her best day, will eventually write one sentence that will move us to tears. He thinks that he could be wrong about that. It might be one in ten thousand. Or one in a million.

Most of us have seen this conundrum of punctuation:

*A woman, without her man, is nothing.*

*A woman: without her, man is nothing.*

Funny but true, and a reminder that the path to good writing is booby-trapped. Little wonder that hundreds of manuscripts are rejected for every one that makes it between the covers of a book. That's as it should be. Even the best writers know that not every effort is equally successful. Artist Louis Slobodkin warns against writing that falls short of its responsibility to young readers. "Beware," he says, "of bad books that offer children neither the opportunity to discover the rich sound of words nor the chance to conjure up their own pictures." He likens such efforts to "chilled lime gelatin, garnished with brilliant bits of pimento—nestling in a few leaves of lettuce and tenderly resting on nothing."

## The Special Bond Between Author and Reader

We talk about messages that reach and nurture children, but we know that *all* messages reach children whether they dish up nourishment or lettuce leaves resting on nothing. Kids think that authors are more like themselves than like real grownups. Girls and boys accept us as trusted friends. They greet us by our first names, no matter how they've been coached to mind their manners.

A third-grade girl at an army base wrote to tell me how excited she was about my upcoming visit. A sad letter followed soon afterward. Her family was moving so she would not be there after all. I responded to both letters and to all those that followed over the years from several states and one foreign country. As the girl grew up she confided in me her concerns about boys, being abused by her father, and going

through therapy. She told me when she was getting married. She sent pictures when each of her three sons was born. I have never met her but she called one evening, and I was thrilled. Our relationship began when she was a lonely child who needed someone she could trust. She chose an author.

More recently, an 11-year-old girl wrote, "Thank you for signing my book so when I grow up I can show my kids." Knowing that your reader trusts you is a writer's reward and greatest responsibility. Children's questions and comments clearly illustrate that they take our words to heart.

## We Hear From Our Readers

This is a poem that generates a lot of responses.

Monday  
Overslept  
Rain is pouring  
Missed the bus  
Dad is roaring  
Late for school  
Forgot my spelling  
Soaking wet  
Clothes are smelling  
Dropped my books  
Got them muddy  
Flunked a test  
Didn't study  
Teacher says  
I must do better  
Lost my money  
Tore my sweater  
Feeling dumber  
Feeling glummer  
Monday sure can be  
A bummer.

—David L. Harrison (1993)

This is a typical note from a reader: "My favorite poem is Monday because it is a true poem for me." It's a "true" poem for that child because the words fit his own experiences. It is reassuring that someone else has endured a thoroughly rotten day too! Adults chuckle. Kids nod knowingly. Authors take note. We understand that being a kid isn't for sissies.

**Being new:** *I'm new so I relate to the part (in a school bus poem) that says some kids are new but you wave at them too. That's exactly what happened to me.*



**Being rejected:** *I know how it feels to be rejected. I entered in the poetry contest in my school in third, fourth, and fifth grade but I never won. I plan to enter this year. It's my last chance.*

**Cursive writing:** *You were just like me when I was learning how to write in cursive. I had trouble with the letter X.*

**Being embarrassed:** *My favorite poem was the one with you falling off the risers. When you fell off the risers I bet you were embarrassed. I have embarrassing moments too.*

**Taking tests:** *I like the poem about the test because it reminds me of the test in fourth grade. It was hard to do too.*

**Being loved:** *The best poem was about the bird in the nest. I liked it because you connected it to your kids.*

If the reality created by words doesn't connect with a child's understanding, he may puzzle over the incongruity.

**Death:** *On the wasp poem (in which a wasp dies), I saw my teacher about to cry. I didn't see why everybody about cried.*

Of course there is always room for differences of opinion. Remember the little girl who loved her new book? When the sequel came out—*Farmer's Dog Goes to the Forest* (Harrison, 2005)—a boy wrote, “*Your book is weird. First, the dog is talking to inanimate objects. For example, the dog was talking to a tree, some grass, and the brook. Clearly you can see the book is kind of out there.*”

## Why We Read Our Mail and Answer It

Authors take these messages quite seriously. They may read like childish notes dashed off in haste, often to satisfy an assignment, but buried in those quick sentences are honest communications from heart to heart. We who write for young people know that good literature provides some truth about life. Not all at once. Not all in the same story or poem. Not all at the same age. But read enough stories and poems about enough characters trying to figure out what to do, and the truth gradually emerges as something recognizable and familiar. Authors read their mail and respond because kids know the issues. They relate, though how and when they do

may vary. Writers must pay attention. Our audience changes—physiologically, intellectually, and emotionally—every 12 months. There's a generation gap between each age from birth to adulthood. There is, as well, a gender gap that causes a lot of confusion and provides plenty of fodder for stories.

In *What I've Learned So Far*, a book written by students (Harrison, 1993), I asked students from pre-school through high school to complete the statement that began: “What I've learned so far is...” From more than 12,000 submissions, 1,100 students became published authors. Samples of their entries provide glimpses into how experience develops awareness over time.

Age 4 “... not to wipe slobber on my daddy's shirt.”

Age 5 “... you can eat a chicken if you kill it.”

Age 7 “... to be anything you have to learn math and stay away from girls.”

Age 8 “... to keep away from boys.”

Age 9 “... never go roller-skating with a dress on.”

Age 10 “... if you're trying to scare girls at a party, once you scare them, get out fast!”

Age 11 “... make sure your sister has clipped her fingernails before you pinch her.”

Age 12 “... it is not hard to kick three boys at once.”

Age 13 “... a girl at the age of 13 doesn't believe anything a male says.”

Age 14 “... no matter how hard you pray, God won't clean your room for you.”

Age 16 “... guys are just like little boys; they always want to 'play' first.”

Age 18 “... what I once thought was love was only extremely active hormones.”

Students in grades 3 through 6 in an elementary school with nearly 1,900 students were asked to read and respond to *Connecting Dots, Poems of my Journey* (Harrison, 2004), a collection of memory-based poems that covered a span of 62 years. The goal was to determine what boys and girls at various levels



would like and not like about the subjects presented. Students rated each of 60 poems on a scale of 1–4 with 4 the highest. Individual comments were encouraged.

Approximately 12,000 total responses were received, plus thousands of comments. Every poem was rated by at least 200 students. Three of the four top favorites of fifth graders were about the opposite sex. Differences in preferences were noted by grade and by gender. Fifth-grade girls liked poems about friendship and about boys blindly following a leader. Sixth-grade boys did not like poems about someone better than they in competitive situations or poems about feelings of tenderness. Boys favored action and things. Girls preferred thinking and relationships. Boys chose poems about a captive turtle, men fighting, and finding a bear skull in a cave. Girls chose missing a grandparent, a wedding ceremony, and adopting a baby. Such information helps writers understand (or confirm suspicions about) our readers. We are as sensitive to the dangers of gender-typing as anyone else. Nevertheless, our readers expect us to know them.

Robert Lewis Stevenson wrote, “Children are passionate after dreams and unconcerned about realities.” Today’s young readers may love Harry Potter, but they are passionate about what is going on in their own lives too. Authors don’t invent what our readers want. They do. Our stories and poems reflect what they tell us they want. They tell us by coming back again and again to the stories that mean the most to them. The great themes in children’s books are the same as in books for adults. Writers work with the ordinary molecules of life. We seek to arrange them into fresh combinations. When we get it right, we hear about it.

### The Value of Letters from Adults

Teachers feel reassured and flattered when they hear from former students about the positive impact they had on young lives. Authors also receive (and love) positive feedback. The creative process is a quiet act performed in private. It is boring to watch. A book, once completed, may sit on a library shelf, also quietly, for days or weeks between those moments when someone discovers it there and picks it up to read. Letters from readers are good for a writer’s ego, but they serve as reminders that the words we use and choose not to use do indeed create lasting realities. Such reports are helpful to writers because

they remind us that books do make a difference, even if the difference may have occurred long ago. The book that inspired the letter below features a baby pig that escapes from the farm and runs off to have an exciting adventure but returns home safely in time for bed.

*“I grew up on a dairy farm, the youngest of five daughters. One of my most precious memories is of my grandmother reading to me. Piggy Wiglet and the Great Adventure (Harrison, 1973) was our favorite. She kept it in the living room, on a small bookshelf that my grandfather had made. My sisters and I would all gather around her rocking chair, two of us on her lap. We used to fight over who got to turn the pages ... I am now twenty-seven years old and I still remember the opening lines ... My grandmother passed away this last September at 90 years old. She’d had multiple strokes and often couldn’t concentrate on a conversation or understand what we were talking to her about. But whenever we reminisced about my childhood, and I reminded her of the first few lines of your book, she smiled. I think it was her favorite too.”*

The little turtle in the book below loses his home to human progress and must endure a long, difficult journey before eventually discovering a new home.

*“Little Turtle’s Big Adventure (Harrison, 1973) was my older sister Tracy’s favorite as a kid. The book was handed down to me and worn out ... I have been looking for the book for about 20 years to give it back to her. I recently discovered a copy in a used book store.”*

A young woman confided that reading the book as a child helped influence her to become a conservationist as an adult.

A mother said that the story helped her young daughter cope with moving to a new home and school.

This rhyming picture book features a small boy who becomes the leader of a long parade of animals. Children, especially little ones, dream of being in control.

*“I wanted to tell you how much The Boy with a Drum (Harrison, 1969) has meant to my family. The first copy we had was*



*purchased for my brother, who enjoyed it so much that he wore it out. I'm told he never went anywhere without it.*

I once attended a funeral where *The Boy with a Drum* was read in its entirety by request left by the deceased.

What makes this next story appealing to the man below may be the connection between the children in the story who spot on every page the animal escaped from a zoo while the adult in charge never recognizes him.

An adult retarded man has treasured *The Case of Og the Missing Frog* (Harrison 1972) since he was young. His copy was destroyed, leaving him distraught. A very caring nurse spent months tracing down a new copy. She wrote, "*David received the book today and was so happy. He hugged me and spilled my soda! I will send pictures.*"

In the following collection of three stories, a little boy meets and outsmarts a series of villains, a favorite fantasy of any age.

*"My children are now 35, 37, and 40. When the 37-year-old was three, we acquired The Book of Giant Stories (Harrison, 1972). I had to read that book every night for six solid months. I could recite it in my sleep, in the car, in the grocery store."* (Another letter about the same book: "*When I was four years old, my mother bought The Book of Giant Stories and started reading it to me. It instantly became my all-time favorite book, not counting the Bible.*")

## The Urge to Get in Touch

Since *Dear Mr. Henshaw* (Cleary, 1983), kids have been writing to authors in hopes of starting a pen pal relationship. Most authors can scarcely keep up with existing commitments so agreeing to long-term correspondence is rare. But there are exceptions. During an especially severe winter, I engaged in a contest with the young son of a friend in Pennsylvania. The challenge was to see which of us could invent the biggest whopper.

*"Dear Ryan, it's so cold here that when people talk to you outside, their words freeze and you have to carry them in by the*

*fire and thaw them to hear what people are saying. Top that!"*

(Ryan): "*It's so cold here our fire's frozen. We can't find out what anyone's saying!"*

This exchange has gone on for a number of years and has recently expanded to include students in schools in other states. Ryan, now 16, remains ever alert to opportunities to use colorful imagery. His most recent: "*It's so wet here that we had a whale in the back yard, and it drowned!"*

## Authors Share More Than Books

As much as children may dislike the notion of revising their "sloppy copy," it's good for them to know that authors make mistakes too, all the time, and that we spend more time rewriting and correcting our work than they do. Because words are so important, we have to pick the best ones for each job. Authors take much longer on their manuscripts than kids in school do. We know that our work is never truly finished. The harder we work the easier it looks. "Spontaneous," according to John Ciardi, "is what you get after the seventeenth draft." Eventually we have to stop and call it done. At that point it is time to share the result of our efforts with young readers whom we will never meet except in our hearts. Writing is an adventure, a winding road that invites us to see where it leads. We who love words take our readers by the hand and, together, we follow.

## No Words

No words  
are as big as a mountain,  
blue as a summer sky,  
flickering quick  
as a hummingbird's wing,  
bright as a butterfly.  
No words  
taste as sweet as wild honey,  
glow like a setting sun,  
howl at the moon  
like wolves in the night,  
leap like a stag on the run.  
No words  
can paint pictures of nature,  
they're poor shabby symbols at best  
that only remind us  
beauty surrounds us,  
the heart must supply the rest.

—David L Harrison (1999)



Here's my best fan letter: "*I love the way you choose your words.*" I love that kid!

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