

An interview with Jen Bryant, by Angela Malo, Adolescent Literature student at Rhode Island College, Providence, R.I. (April, 2011)

- 1. On your website, you state that beginning writers should “imitate the writers they love.” Is this how you began fiction writing?**

In the largest sense, yes, that’s basically how I learned how to write fiction and poetry. By “imitation” I mean that I would read and re-read – very purposefully – the work of fiction writers and poets who really “spoke” to me. In doing so, I’d try to read as a writer and always try to notice the technical and stylistic aspects of their craft that made them so effective. For fiction, this included things like use of dialogue and description, transitions between chapters, length of chapters, use of slang, invented language or regional vernacular, use and frequency of poetic devices – that kind of thing. Then – in my own writing, I’d try to practice one of those things and see how it went. Sometimes it wouldn’t go so well! Other times, it did, and in that very trial-and error way, and over many years, I would incorporate something new into my own writing repertoire.

- 2. You have obviously found your own voice but do the books you read now influence your new projects in any way?**

Sure. Art forms are always changing, so I don’t think it’d be wise to keep my head in the sand. Graphic novels, for instance, have boomed in the past several years, and even though I haven’t yet written one myself, I’m keenly aware of their influence and popularity. So – when I write a piece of short fiction or even a picture book text, I do think about how my words might be represented visually in this form, even if, in the end, it’s published in a more traditional form.

On the other hand, I’m less influenced by “trends” in topics or subject matter. I’ve said no to many topics/ideas that have been offered or proposed to me, even though I knew they’d be commercially viable. I have to feel some strong emotional connection to my subjects and my stories, some authentic interest in them – or I just won’t care enough to write about them.

- 3. Research is a must to create accurate historical novels and your books are very successful in their authenticity. How do you conduct the research for your novels and how long does it generally take for you to gather enough information to develop such rich detail in your stories?**

That’s a great question and also one that’s difficult to answer because each book is a little different. For my novel *The Trial* (about the Lindbergh baby kidnapping) I spent about a year doing research of various kinds (visiting archives, reading books, newspapers, letters, watching movies & plays, interviewing experts, etc.) before I began to write the book. But I was writing a lot of individual poems about the topic in the meantime. Even so, the “research” for that book goes back to my childhood, long before I knew I’d grow up to be a writer! On average, for a novel, I’d say I spend a minimum of a six months doing just research before I write – and then I do more research as I write b/c the process itself always introduces more questions. Picture books can take just as long, believe it or not. But the writing usually goes a little faster.

- 4. You stated that when writing *The Trial* you drew on your own memories from childhood to create much of the setting. Does your background play a role in all your writing? If so, to what extent?**

Yes! I am definitely “a writer of place.” Setting is very, very important to me, and my characters seem to grow out of my settings once I have that place established in my mind. You’ve probably noticed that my novels are all set in places I have lived (small NJ towns: *The Trial* and *Kaleidoscope Eyes*; rural and suburban Philadelphia: *Pieces of Georgia* and *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro*) or places similar to these that I’ve spent some time in like Dayton, TN (Ringside 1925.) My own interests and obsessions from childhood also play a part: I was a very physical kid who loved to ride my bike, climb trees, ride horses, etc. and so my characters are usually like this too. I also grew up next to my family’s funeral home, so of course I was exposed to some serious issues much earlier and more frequently than most kids are: death, grief, multiple (and highly contrasting) views and traditions surrounding organized religion, etc. These things often creep into my plots without my even thinking about them.

- 5. Do your characters contain elements of your own personality or of people you know?**

Most of my characters are composites of many people I know (including me, I suppose), or at least have met. My female protagonists tend to be good observers of their social and familial environment and they are constantly wondering what life in the larger world is like. As a young person, I was certainly very much like that. Some characters are molded more from those I’ve observed. Tiffany in *Pieces of Georgia*, for example, represents a kind of teen I think a lot of students today will recognize: high achieving, well-intentioned, athletic, popular – and yet exhausted and over-scheduled. Both guys and girls who read the book have told me: I can relate to that character so well.

- 6. The prose in your novels flows so seamlessly that it seems as if writing in verse must be second nature to you. What is your methodology? Do you begin your novels by writing in verse or do you start with an outline or narrative?**

MOST of the time, I have to “back into” a novel through images and sound. I might scribble (and I mean that literally--I am really messy in the beginning!) a few loose stanzas of poetry and/or a few rough paragraphs of prose in which I try to get a voice or a point of view to arise naturally out of the images and rhythms. That part is very hard to explain, and perhaps because I came to children’s literature through the experience of writing poetry, I’m just more comfortable with this way of beginning. Both my writing friends and my editors will tell you that I fervently WISH I was one of those authors who could work from an outline. But, alas, such is not the case! For me, every piece of writing is a new and different journey. As E.L. Doctorow says, it’s like “driving across the country at night: you can only see as far as your headlights show you, but you can make the whole trip that way.” A very apt image, I think.

- 7. You have the ability to write for children, adolescents and adults. When an idea comes to you, how do you decide which audience you will target? Have you ever changed your mind once you’ve begun on a new project?**

I try to let the writing decide for me. Like many writers who write across the age groups, I don’t really see them as separate. I often find inspiration for adult poetry in my teen novels

(I wrote several adult poems about the Wyeth family's art as I was writing my teen verse novel *Pieces of Georgia*) and visa versa: my historical novel *The Trial* grew out of several adult poems I'd written about the baby's kidnapping.) My favorite thing is to find a topic or biographical subject that, at first, doesn't appear to be "kid" material – and then to challenge myself to find a way into that (examples: my picture book biographies of poet Marianne Moore and composer Olivier Messiaen.) As for your last question, I have abandoned many unfinished stories and poems – but not because of the target age group – mostly because of time constraints or occasionally the piece just didn't "work" for some reason.

8. How does your intended audience affect your writing process? Do you develop ideas that you feel will only appeal to your audience or do you write whatever you feel passionate about?

I avoid trends at all cost! I write only what I'm interested in or passionate about. I've devoted too much of my life to my craft to ever consider working on something that I don't feel is worthy of becoming at least one small drop in the bucket we call "literature." There are thousands of people writing "books" out there. . . . music, sports, and TV celebrities, disaster survivors, politicians, etc. Some of them sell thousands and thousands of copies. I can't be influenced or discouraged by that . . . I have to do the very best work I can and write about things that will still matter a hundred years from now: the lives and works of great artists & poets, the drama of great historical trials and events, the struggles and triumphs of everyday life in small-town America . These are the things that last, the things that keep me at my desk for hours each and every day.

9. Have you received any interesting responses from Young Adult readers or their parents? Is there any specific event that stands out in your mind?

I'm amazed at some of the letters and emails I receive – even about books I wrote more than a decade ago. One boy told me that after he read *The Trial*, he arranged for his whole family to take trip to Flemington , NJ where the trial was held. He took a video camera with him and as they visited the courthouse, the Union Hotel, and the Lindbergh estate in Hopewell , he made a film documentary about the whole thing. Amazing. Another girl wrote to me last week and said that she'd never finished a whole novel before, but when her teacher gave her a copy of *Pieces of Georgia*, she read the whole thing over one day and night without stopping and now she's bugging me to write a sequel! There are many other stories like this, too. The most astonishing thing to me is how deeply connected readers of today--from many different walks of life and many different regions of the country – feel to the characters in my books. On the days when things aren't going well for me on the page, I flip to one of their letters or emails and it buoys me up tremendously. It's the whole reason I write.

10. Many of your novels are available as e-books. Do you believe that this technology has a positive or negative impact on your writing and the editorial side of your work? Do you read e-books?

You know, I think we're all waiting to see what impact this recent technology has on reading and literacy. For me, the word "book" will always conjure up multiple senses--- touch, smell, hearing – as well as sight. To me an "e-book" is a misnomer because it's a document, but not a carefully crafted "made" thing in the sense that a hard-copy book is. That's not to say I object to "e-books" at all – we must move forward with the times and the technology just as we have in the past (i.e. the pen and the spiral notebook are technological

inventions, too!). What concerns me is the possibility that that the aesthetic qualities of a well made printed book will become economically unfeasible and our writing will be funneled through homogenizing screens that diminish our whole imaginative experience.

11. And finally, what was the one character that you most enjoyed bringing to life on the page?

Hmmm. Tough question! I always feel closest to the characters I've been living with in my head most recently. So for now, I have to say it was Carmen's best friend Maggie, in my novel *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro*. Maggie is one of 4 teen narrators in this novel – two girls and two guys – and she gets to observe the romance between Carmen and Ryan (a Valley Forge Military cadet) develop. Like me, she is a close observer of human behavior and she sees clearly where all this is going to end up, but she's powerless to stop it. I had a lot of fun when I was writing in her voice. In fact, I've just been invited to visit the Valley Forge Military Academy to speak to a class of cadets who are reading the novel with their English teacher!! Maybe that will give me some ideas for a sequel . . . who knows?!