

TEN QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH LANDRA JENNINGS

1. When did you start writing?

I began writing stories as a child. In particular, I remember a story about ghosts and demons that horrified my fifth-grade teacher. In my twenties, most of the writing I did was business writing, though I dabbled in poetry and short stories, and jotted down ideas for longer works. In 2008, hoping for a career shift, I began focusing on longer form fiction. Writing for children seemed easy, I thought. I'd start with that. Little did I know!

2. What motivates you to write?

I am fascinated by story, turns of phrase, the English language. As a compulsive reader, I will be up late into the night with a good book and I read many books a year. I love the Greenville Public Library System! I'm not sure what my motivation is, I only know I will begin inventing dialogue or plotting a story at random times and I can't seem to help it.

3. Why write middle grade fiction?

Ages eight through twelve is a gut-wrenching time for many kids as they are figuring out who they are and how they relate to their family, their peers. I don't know many people who give glowing reviews of their middle school experience! I was no different—those years were difficult for me and for my family. In some ways, through my writing, I'm sending a message to my eleven-year-old self, along with all kids: You are strong, you are resilient, you will get through this.

4. Why fantasy fiction (versus realistic fiction)?

Middle schoolers tend to work out their problems better when they can be a few steps removed from their own life. C.S. Lewis is one of many who defended the value of children reading fairy tales. In his essay, "Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*," he asserted that in fantasy fiction, "we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it." From my perspective, having capable young protagonists solving problems that seem insurmountable is wonderful role modeling. Many researchers have said fantasy stimulates creative thinking in children, expanding their minds from the everyday. But mainly, I just like it.

5. Where did the idea for the book come from?

One day, I started writing about a miserable old witch living in a swamp in South Carolina (Maybe I was having a bad day; I don't remember). As I kept writing, the story of the girls began to develop. Later, as I was talking about the evolving story with my son, he commented on how desperate the younger girl must be to get her sister back, because not only does she love her sister and want to rescue her but she believes she can't function without her. I just found that observation really interesting and I leaned into that.

TEN QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH LANDRA JENNINGS

6. How did you decide who the main character would be? The ensemble cast?

The main character was the person who needed to change the most. I didn't decide on it right away. At one point, the manuscript had multiple perspectives, the dog even had a point of view! As the story took shape, it became clear that Neve was the one who truly needed to come into her own. In developing the supporting characters, I used small pieces of myself, as writers do. For instance, Sammy tries to make everyone happy—he's a pleaser, which I am as well. Piper stubbornly doesn't want to conform, and I have a little core of that too. The witch is Neve's antithesis—she refuses to let go of her own sister and thus is unable to change and grow herself.

7. What are you most proud of in this book?

The complexity of the sisters' relationship is the most improved from the early drafts. It's the gem that needed a whole lot of shining. My editor helped so much here (and everywhere else!) pointing out the nuances of their relationship. I am proud that in ironing out the details of their relationship, the book grew to include themes of self-empowerment, as well as learning to think for yourself and act on your own beliefs, all of those being important life skills.

8. Which books inspired you the most when writing this one?

Anne Ursu's middle grade *Breadcrumbs* and Laura Ruby's young adult *Bone Gap* were very influential. In both of those stellar novels, a loved one is kidnapped by a supernatural figure and the protagonist is the only one who can rescue them. There's also a guilt and mystery about the event, fairy tale elements, and the need for the protagonist to have realizations about themselves. Both those authors were my faculty advisors in my MFA program and are role models for the type of writer I want to be.

9. What is your writing process like?

Some days I'll write for hours. Other days, I am distracted, working on other things or am too enmeshed in social media. But I do try and sit down at the computer most days.

10. What things do you do when not writing?

Read! Also, I am very fond of chocolate; therefore, I like to exercise. I love to snow-ski. I feel passionate about helping women and children in my community and I have done a lot of work for non-profits. Currently, I'm chair of the board for Jasmine Road Inc., an organization that works alongside women survivors of trafficking and abuse.