

Four Successful Novelists: Their Struggles and Sage Advice

Anxiety. Insecurity. Despair. Rare is the individual who escapes these emotions during the writing and submission process. Rarer still are writers who persist despite every stumbling block, using each as a stepping stone—in brief, writers for whom Gumption Trumps All.

In the following pages, four novelists share what you'll never find between the covers of their award-winning books. Our interviewees include **Bobbie Pyron**, **Dandi Daley Mackall**, **Jay Asher**, and **Jerry Spinelli**. (See their bios in the sidebars.) Whether they've published one solo novel or hundreds, whether they're up-and-coming or wildly acclaimed, their polished pages show no signs of behind-the-scenes angst. No insert tells readers, "Here I cut the most evocative scene I've ever written—because it belonged in some other story." No scrawl in the margin confesses, "After these words, I quit writing for nine months because rejections swallowed me up."

Yet each of these talented authors—among countless others, published and aspiring—have wrestled with monumental hurdles. How did our interviewees reach the finish line? Read on, to see if their words ring true for you.

What has been the single most challenging aspect of your writing?

BP: Learning to trust my instinct. It's so easy to question yourself, particularly when you're "pre-published." You question whether you should try to write to the market, whether you should use character sketch sheets, whether you should outline your plot before you write even one word. I had to learn to trust my ability to write, to tell the story given to me by whatever magic and grace is out there. To quote author Sonya Hartnett: "I write whatever comes to me, whatever the book requires. My first responsibility is to the work."

DDM: Middles!... We can't view the middle as marking time until we get to our great ending. Making scenes is part of the answer—having something at stake in each scene, even if it's small. I try to start every chapter, every scene with: "Will she/he, or won't she/he?" I don't write that, but I think it. Will Hope find the photos she needs? Will she convince the lawyer to let Jeremy plead "Not Guilty"? Each question needs a concrete answer that will lead toward that wonderful ending—but keep the reader reading in the meantime.

JA: My biggest challenge, which deals

more with personality than craftwork, remains keeping myself from feeling discouraged. If I were to look at a previous page in a manuscript I'm working on and it reads poorly, I often won't write any more that day. To avoid that, I take as long as I need to tweak the words in each paragraph until they feel exactly how I want them to feel, and then I move on. When it comes time to edit the full manuscript, I'm already fairly happy with what I've done. At conferences, most writers and editors will tell you to not worry about how horrible your first draft is. Just write it! Get the story down! But that's never worked for me. If I did that, I'd probably reread the first few paragraphs, and then delete the entire file.

JS: I had long since graduated from college, yet was still writing as if hoping for an A in my creative writing class. My eye was on posterity instead of the sidewalk. It was a revealing moment when I discovered that "popularity" is not necessarily a dirty word and that it's possible for writing to be both popular and good. I climbed down from the ivory tower and have kept my feet planted on the sidewalk ever since... Reading *The Exorcist* helped me. That title, and most other bestsellers, never made it up the ivory tower; and I, until then, had never lowered myself down. I not only read it—I loved it. Maybe it wasn't Dickens or Dostoyevsky, but it induced me to suspend my disbelief. I kept turning the pages. I remember thinking: He's doing a lot of things right. It was, simply, a good yarn. So I began to write not for the ages but for today, not for textbook critics but for myself. I simplified my job down to three words: Tell a story.

What challenges did you overcome in getting your debut or subsequent works published?

BP: The biggest challenge in getting *A Dog's Way Home* into the world was finding an editor or agent who believed in the way the book was written: in alternating points of view between a dog and his girl. It was clear to me when I first started hearing and seeing the story that this was the way the book wanted to be told. So I wrote the first draft with Abby's chapters in first person and Tam, the dog's, chapters in third "person."

Nancy Sondel is founding director of the Pacific Coast Children's Writers Workshop, a seminar for intermediate to published novelists. (*Alum Bobbie Pyron's novels inspired this article, as Sondel saw them workshopped in their journey to publication.*) Enroll in June for the 10th annual event: October 5-7, 2012 in Santa Cruz, CA. www.childrenswritersworkshop.com

Special Report:

by Nancy Sondel

But when I workshopped the manuscript and sent it to editors and agents, I was told over and over that I “couldn’t” tell the story that way. Kids wouldn’t get it, they said. I tried rewriting it with different POVs, but it just didn’t work for me. Finally, after many rejections, I found an agent who loved the book the way it was written.

DDM: Seriously, I begin every book with the fear that I can’t really write this book; and that if I do manage to write it, nobody will want to read it. Yep—even after close to 500 books, I hear that naysaying voice in my head. For me, the answer is trusting God and trusting the writing process. Not all of my books have a strong faith element, but they’re all written from a strong faith that I have something that needs to be said. My favorite part of the process is rewriting. I know I can make any manuscript better, so I try to convince myself that I just have to get through that first (“vomit”) draft—get words on paper. Then I’ll come back and make it work.

I wrote the first chapter of *The Silence of Murder* nine years before I realized it was a mystery. I wrote the rest in five months, then rewrote another five to six months. I only had four months between novels in the Starlight Animal Rescue and Backyard Horses series (Tyndale 2009 and 2011-2012). But the process was the same—an awful first draft, followed by more than a dozen rewrites.

JA: When it was time to get moving on my second novel, I became paralyzed by the success of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. That book was such an extreme for the types of stories I like to tell, anything else would be quite different. What if the new book didn’t sell as well? What if readers were hoping to have the same experience as with the first book? For two years, I didn’t write a single word of fiction. I almost completely gave up on writing, even convincing myself that I was okay with giving up.

It took one of my favorite authors, Carolyn Mackler, asking if I’d be interested in co-writing a book with her to feel excited about writing again. Brainstorming with her was so much fun, and I kept telling myself that this project wouldn’t be considered a follow-up because it was written with someone else. But now that *The Future of Us* is done, I feel just as proud of it as of my first book. Not only was brainstorming with Carolyn fun, but the constant give-and-take of creative energy kept me inspired. Since finishing our collaboration, we’ve had wonderful discussions about future solo works, which has also

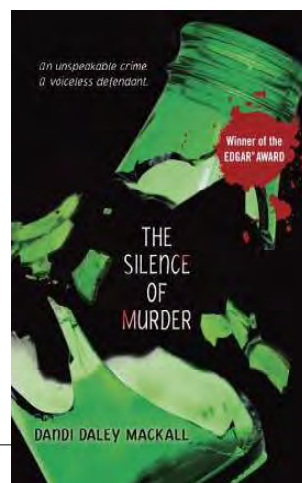
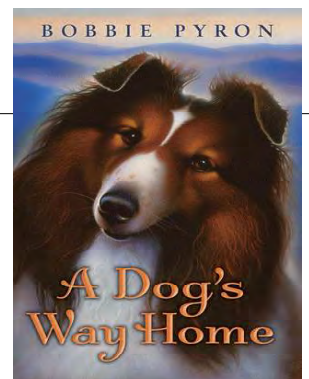
been inspiring.

JS: A quarter of a century passed between the time I decided to become “a writer” and the day I signed a contract for my first published book. I say my first *published* book because that novel (*Space Station Seventh Grade*) was in fact the fifth that I had written. Nobody wanted the first four. I sent them everywhere. Collected enough rejection slips to paper a house. Was I devastated? Sure. Every time I sliced open an envelope to find a rejection slip, I felt like sticking my head in the oven. I fancied even the cemetery would reject me with the words “...does not meet our needs.”

But a funny thing happened the day after each rejection: the sun came up. Life was going on with or without me. I packed up my manuscript, used up a couple more stamps and sent it somewhere else. Short stories. Novels. Years and years of that. But through it all something was happening of which I was not aware. Looking back, I can see now that those four flops that nobody wanted were in fact exercises, exercises by which I was, however fitfully, learning to write. So that when I came down to the kitchen one day and discovered only bones in the bag of fried chicken I had intended to take to work, I found myself not just at the remains of uncontrolled juvenile appetite, but at a story. And finally, after those four exercises, I knew how to write it.

(Continued on page 6...)

Bobbie Pyron authored the teen novel, *The Ring* (WestSide Books, 2009), the award-winning middle grade novel, *A Dog’s Way Home*, and the forthcoming middle grade novel, *The Dogs of Winter*. Visit her website at www.bobbiepyron.com, and her blog at www.bobbiepyron.blogspot.com



Dandi Daley Mackall has written for every age group and in every genre, publishing over 450 books with Knopf/Random House and most other major publishers. *The Silence of Murder* won the Edgar Award for Best YA Mystery 2012; *My Boyfriends’ Dogs* is in development as a Hallmark movie; *Winnie the Horse Gentler* has sold around 800,000 copies. *Larger than Life Lara* and other titles won state awards, ALA Best Book nominations, Mom’s Choice awards, and more. See her work at www.dandibooks.com, www.silenceofmurder.com, dandimackall.wordpress.com

Four Novelists' Struggles and Advice

(...continued from page 5)

Can you offer any inspiring words to writers? What, if anything, would you have done differently?

BP: I would have been a bit more careful about how much I workshopped/critiqued the book in its infancy. Stephen King, in his indispensable book, *On Writing*, advises to “write with the door closed” when you’re working on that first draft. Resist the urge to show it to anyone during that vulnerable time. Also, I would have concentrated strictly on finding an agent rather than focusing so much on editors. Great agents are worth their weight in gold! They will get your work out of the slush pile and into an editor’s hands. And as trite and shopworn as it sounds, it really, really only takes one yes! I *know* it’s hard, I know how frustrating it is. But that one yes will change your world.

DDM: Don't compete with other writers. Own your voice. Realize nobody can write the book you will. Nobody except you! Involve others—get into a critique group. Take joy in writing! You're a writer—enjoy every word. (And that spells Do It!)

JA: I wouldn't have done anything differently. I can look back and see how every twist and turn moved me toward where I needed to be. Regarding all of my earlier manuscripts, even though I loved them, I'm glad they weren't published. Maybe one day I'll rework them and resubmit them, but I really couldn't have asked for a better intro to the literary world. Still, it was tremendously important for me to work on each one of those unpublished manuscripts. Each one taught me something I needed to learn about the craft before I could begin *Thirteen Reasons Why*.



Jay Asher's debut teen novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, has been on the New York Times bestsellers list for more than two years and has sold to 31 foreign markets. His second teen novel, *The Future of Us* (co-written with Carolyn Mackler), has sold to 15 foreign markets. Both have been optioned by major film studios. www.jayasher.blogspot.com, www.thirteenreasonswhy.com.



Jerry Spinelli has published more than 30 books, printed in more than 35 languages. His novels include *Maniac Magee* (Newbery Medal), *Wringer* (Newbery Honor), *Stargirl*, *Loser*, *Milkweed*, and *Jake and Lily*, as well as picture books *My Daddy and Me* and *I Can Be Anything!* www.jerryspinelli.com

Not that those rejections were ever easy. When you work so hard on a manuscript, and truly believe in it, rejection is both confusing and painful. But being published was my dream. And while it's probably not healthy to have a dream that leans so heavily on the subjective opinions of others, I didn't choose my dream. It was there almost my entire life, and I wasn't going to stop until it became reality.

JS: I would read more. I think one reason why it took me so long to get the hang of this storytelling business is that I read so little as a kid, thus depriving myself of models to learn from and emulate. I really didn't begin to read and enjoy fiction on my own until after college. I sometimes think that's why I had Maniac Magee carry a book everywhere he goes. I couldn't go back in time and do it right myself, but at least I could make my character a reader. I tell kids, “Follow Maniac, not me.”

My golden rule for aspiring writers: Write what you care about. I always underline the word “care.” If you write what you truly care about, you are more likely to pour the best of yourself onto the page. And if you do so, you maximize your chances of touching the reader. And if all you get for your trouble is a rejection slip, stay away from the oven, go to sleep, look out the window next morning, and I'm betting the sun will be up. That's your job as a writer, an artist: try, fail, try, fail. You keep going. You hang in there. The longer you do so, the more likely it is that two things will happen: you will become better and better at writing, and others will drop out of the race. And if after four books and years of rejections they still keep coming—hey—it's 2012 and you've got something I didn't. Publish yourself!

Regardless of how your book is born, its fate lies largely in your hands. Our generous interviewees have touched on some hard-won tips to steer you:

Dream freely. Write with the conviction that your story must be told, and that *capable you* are the one to tell it. Honor your own working style—meaning, perhaps, you'll strive to perfect each paragraph the first time around instead of rushing to complete a first draft. Further, write as many drafts as it takes. In your quest to publish a glorious story, view setbacks as guidebooks and tools. Let no one, especially capable you, crush your dreams.