

Gail Carson Levine on Writing



"...I just write a story. Self-discovery is one of the most wonderful things about writing, and you can't do that if you are too hard on yourself."

—Gail Carson Levine, *Authors & Artists for Young Adults*

“I write to the reader I was when I was a kid,” said Gail Carson Levine in an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*. So it shouldn't be surprising that she loved fairy tales as a child. Stories like “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” and “Beauty and the Beast” were among her favorites. She wants her own books to be “exciting and hard to put down. And I especially want them to be fun.”

The critical inner voice (the “self-critic”) that made painting an unhappy experience for Levine is very quiet when she writes, she has said. This doesn't mean that writing is always an easy or happy process. Some days, or some projects, are easier than others. Still, she loves being an author. “I love having written. Sometimes I love writing. I love to revise. Revising is my favorite part of writing,” she told the *Christian Science Monitor*.

During the first nine years of her writing life, when every story she submitted was rejected, she learned from those rejections. She learned about revising her work, and she learned the importance of sticking with a story and trying to finish it, even if the writing is difficult. She advises young writers, “Suspend judgment of your work and keep writing . . . and be patient. Writing and glaciers advance at the same pace!”

When asked if she thinks bravery is a part of writing, Levine said, “Any creative act is scary and requires courage. You feel like you have only yourself to draw on, and what if you come up empty? But each creative act gives you a reserve of skill and experience.”

Most of Levine’s published work involves fairy-tale themes, and the stories take place in invented worlds. Is it hard to create a world from scratch instead of using the real world in your work? She talked about this in her *Christian Science Monitor* interview: “Making up one’s own world is complicated. You have to keep track of it; you have to make sure that you are clueing the reader in. But working in [writing about] the real world is very hard, for me anyway. For other people it’s not.”

Levine discovers things about herself through writing, “but the discoveries aren’t necessarily tied in with developing my characters,” she has said. “It’s messier than that. For example, after I wrote *Ella* I realized how hard it is for me to say no—how obedient I tend to be. But I wasn’t aware of this during the writing.”

When Gail Carson Levine begins a book, she doesn't always know the ending. While writing *Ella*, for example, she didn't know what cause or motivation would be sufficient to drive Ella to break the curse—she thought it might happen through her relationship with Hattie. As it turned out, the motivation was something (and someone) else.

Writers often experiment with ideas or themes that have attracted them in other books. For example, one reason for the many languages spoken in *Ella Enchanted* is Levine's admiration for *The Lord of the Rings*. Because she loved the way J. R. R. Tolkien created and used languages in the Rings trilogy, she wanted to try something similar in her book. Once she got started, she worked hard to make each of the languages spoken in *Ella Enchanted* very different.

Even after *Ella Enchanted* was published, Levine continued to take the writing class that had gotten her started. She also participated in groups with other writers. Today, she gives writing workshops at a middle school near her home. "I love it. . . . It's the best thing I do," she has said.

Gail Levine helps her middle-school writing students by encouraging them to explore new ideas. She talks a lot about that little voice in a writer's head, the "self-critic," and says "That voice is the enemy of creativity. Get that voice to shut up."

You Be the Author!



- **What does it feel like?:** What does it feel like to wake up from a hundred-year sleep? to have a magic cloak? to be turned into a bear? Gail Carson Levine says she likes to slow fairy tales down and help the reader experience extraordinary events like these. Think about a magic event in a favorite fairy tale, and imagine it happening to you. Write a short story, in the first person, about how it happens and what it feels like. You don't have to follow the plot of that fairy tale if you don't want to. Just take the event and place yourself in that moment. Then what happens?
- **The real story:** Levine wrote her own version of the Cinderella story to explain why the heroine behaves the way she does. She even included a simple explanation for something that happens in the story of the elves and the shoemaker. Is there a fairy tale or folk tale that has never quite made sense to you? Is there a character whose behavior is annoying or inexplicable? Tell the real story. Explain it to us. It doesn't have to be a novel (unless you want it to be); a short story will do.
- **Begin a fictional correspondence:** Letters are an important element in *Ella Enchanted*. Ella (and the reader) learn a lot from the letters that appear in Mandy's magic book. Ella's correspondence with Char is how the two friends grow even

closer, sharing their lives and their ideas with each other. “It is great good luck that I have a pen and paper and a friend,” Ella writes to Char. With an old or new friend, start a fictional correspondence. Each person creates a character, and the two of you write to each other as your characters for a period of time (weeks or months). You can start out knowing who each other’s character is, or you can reveal him or her in your letters. Tell each other who you are, how you live, what interests you. Describe any adventures you have. Would your fictional selves use e-mail or pencil and paper? Would they include drawings or photos, or not? Be sure to copy all the letters so each person has a complete set. You can save them in a portfolio, share them with others, or keep them a secret.

- **Magic book:** If you could give Ella a piece of advice, or simply be the voice of a supportive friend, at any point during the story, what would you tell her? Write a letter that would appear in her magic book just when she needs it.
- **(Dis)obedience:** Ella was under a curse, and sometimes you may be unhappy about having to obey rules in so many areas of your life. Write about what tomorrow would be like if you woke up with total control over your life for the day. Or, write about how you would behave if Lucinda ordered you to be happy about obeying everyone’s rules. In each case, think about a few things: Would you tell anyone, or would you try to keep your obedience (or disobedience) a secret? Why? How would your friends and family react to your new attitude?

Activities



- **Make a bestiary:** In medieval Europe, a bestiary was a beautifully illustrated book or manuscript that presents a collection of real and mythical animals. Make a bestiary of the creatures found in the royal menagerie in Frell, and add any other mythical animals that appeal to you. Along with your illustrations, include short descriptions of the creatures and anything interesting you know about them: their natural habitats, what (or whom) they eat, whether or not they're dangerous, and so on. Check your local library for information on medieval manuscripts—you might be able to find a reproduction of an original bestiary, or even the real thing.
- **Learn a language:** Though Ella's remarkable "once heard, always remembered" technique is *not* the way most of us learn languages, new languages are worth the effort. Begin to learn a second language. You can sign up for a class or find a friend or tutor to help you. There are also books, audiotapes, and Web sites available for people who are trying to learn languages on their own. If you're already bilingual, go for a third, or teach a language! Be a friend and tutor someone who wants to learn.
- **Give a gift:** Think about someone who's special to you. If you were that person's fairy godmother and could give him or her a magic gift, what would it be, and why? What would the consequences be? Once you've figured out what the best gift

would be, write a card or letter to the recipient explaining what you wish for them. You can do this for a special occasion, like a birthday or wedding, or just because you feel like it. Gifts are always welcome—unless they're from Lucinda.

- **Meet the Japanese Cinderella:** It seems as though almost every culture or country you can think of has some version of the Cinderella story in its folklore. Chilean, Russian, Indian, Mexican, Himalayan, Japanese, Egyptian, and Chinese Cinderellas are just a few of the stories you'll find. Explore your local library or bookstore, and read as many as you can! You can ask a librarian for assistance. Notice how the stories differ from culture to culture and also how certain elements of the stories are the same all over the world. This is true of many other familiar fairy tales, so if you enjoy reading them, you can keep on reading around the world.

- **Start a writing group:** Many writers find it helpful to be part of a group or workshop in which they can share their work with other writers and exchange ideas about writing. They might do writing exercises together, like Gail Levine and her students. If this appeals to you, start a writing group! Invite a few interested friends or classmates to join. You may want to start with a fairly small group of four or five people. Find a regular meeting time (every few weeks, for example) and a meeting place. Perhaps you can get permission to meet at school. Decide whether one person will "lead" the group or that you'll take turns. Should members read one another's work before they meet? Be sure you have a way of getting copies to everyone. Then, set some ground rules. (For example, members need to be supportive and respectful of one another.) And begin your writing adventure!

• **Enjoy a cream trifle:** One of the dishes served at Sir Peter's manor is cream trifle. Trifle is a delicious dessert usually made with cream, fruit, and cake. It has been made for hundreds of years in many parts of the world. There are probably hundreds of different varieties. Here is an easy, no-cook version that you and your friends can make to serve at your own banquet.

Ingredients

- 1 16-ounce prepared pound cake
- 1 large jar of jam (strawberry, raspberry, blackberry)
- A handful of fresh berries (strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, blueberries) for decoration
- 1 pint of whipping cream
- 1 small package of chopped walnuts (optional)

Directions

1. Wash your hands.
2. Mash up the cake, using a fork or your clean hands.
3. Pour the cream into a large mixing bowl. Using a whisk or an electric mixer, whip the cream. Ask an adult for help. Whisk (or mix) the cream until it becomes thick.
4. Put a layer of crushed cake in the bottom of a large, clear bowl. Then put a layer of jelly on top of the cake. Then spoon a layer of whipped cream over the jelly. (You could add a layer of chopped nuts, too!)
5. Repeat step 4 until the bowl is full, then top your dessert with a fluffy layer of whipped cream. Decorate the cream with the fresh berries of your choice.
6. Refrigerate your trifle for at least two hours before serving (cover the dish carefully with plastic wrap). Refrigerate any leftovers—they should be good for two or three days.