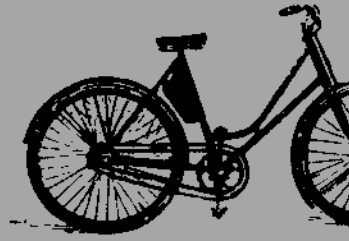


About Lois Lowry



"From the time I was eight or nine, I wanted to be a writer. Writing was what I liked best in school; it was what I did best in school."

—Lois Lowry

Lois Lowry says that, aside from photography, she has never wanted to do anything but write. The author of more than twenty-five books for children and young adults, Lowry developed a love of language, and a love of stories, early on. "I was a solitary child," she remembers, "born the middle of three, who lived in the world of books and my own imagination. There are some children, and I was this kind of child, who are introverts and love to read—who prefer to curl up with a book than to hang out with friends or play at the ball field. Children like that begin to develop a feeling for language and for story. And that was true for me—that's how I became a writer."

Lois Lowry was born on March 20, 1937, to Katharine and Robert Hammersberg. Her sister, Helen, was three when Lois was born; her brother, Jon, was born six years after Lois.

Lowry's father was an army dentist, and his military career led the family all over the world. Lois was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, where she lived until she was three. Then the family moved to New York City for two years. When Robert Hammersberg was sent overseas during World War II, Lois, her mother, and her sister went to stay with her mother's parents at their home in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. That's where her brother was born. Seven years later, the family went to join her father in Tokyo, Japan, where he was stationed. They lived there for three years before returning to the United States and New York City, where Lowry went to high school.

After high school, Lowry went to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, but left after her sophomore year to get married. Since her husband was a naval officer, Lowry continued making the frequent moves required of military families. Over the next six years, she lived in California, Connecticut, Florida, South Carolina, and Massachusetts. In the early 1960s, with four children under the age of five, Lowry and her husband moved to Maine to raise their family.

"My children grew up in Maine," Lowry says. "So did I. I . . . finally began to write professionally, the thing I had dreamed of doing since those childhood years when I had endlessly scribbled stories and poems in notebooks."

Lowry went back to college in Maine. She got her degree from the University of Southern Maine in 1973, and went to graduate school. In 1976, she discovered her chosen career: writing for children. "Since childhood, I always wanted to be a writer," Lowry

says. "I majored in writing in college, but I thought of myself as a writer for adults. It wasn't until I wrote my first book for kids in 1976 that I realized it was something that I loved doing. Now I hardly ever write for adults."

Lowry has written about many topics, some autobiographical, others not. Her first book, *A Summer to Die*, is about the death of an older sibling. She wrote the novel from personal experience: She lost her own sister to cancer in 1962. But whether or not the topics are based on her own experience, the feelings are. "Every time I write a book, I feel all the same feelings I felt when I was nine," Lowry has said.

While she may express the feelings of a nine-year-old in her writing, Lowry expresses the concerns of a grown woman. "I have grandchildren now," she says. "For them, I feel a greater urgency to do what I can to convey the knowledge that we live intertwined on this planet and that our future as human beings depends upon our caring more, and doing more, for one another."

Books, Lowry says, are one way to understand this interconnectedness. "The man that I named The Giver passed along to the boy knowledge, history, memories, color, pain, laughter, love, and truth. Every time you place a book in the hands of a child, you do the same thing. . . . Each time a child opens a book, he pushes open the gate that separates him from Elsewhere. It gives him choices, it gives him freedom."

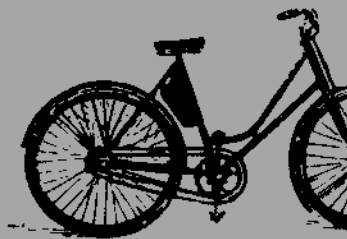
Lowry sits at her desk every day, typing and retyping, putting together stories that open the gate to Elsewhere. "I have a

relationship with—and an obligation to—the reader,” she says, “because I affect that person’s life and thinking, and that is no small responsibility.”

In addition to doing the writing that she loves, Lowry finds time for a number of other activities. She is an avid reader. “Sitting around eating fresh apricots and reading a good book is my idea of heaven,” Lowry says, adding that this was one of her favorite activities when she was ten, too. She also loves gardening—she has two houses with flower gardens—and cooking. She knits for her children and grandchildren, and likes to play bridge and go to the movies. And, she is an accomplished photographer; her work graces the covers of her books *The Giver*, *Number the Stars*, and *Gathering Blue*.

Lowry now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and spends her weekends at a farmhouse in New Hampshire with a Tibetan terrier named Bandit.

How *The Giver* Came About



"We can forget pain.... And it is comfortable to do so. But I also wonder... is it safe to do that, to forget?"

—Lois Lowry

Lois Lowry describes the origins of *The Giver* as a river that began back when she was eleven years old. At the time, her family lived in Tokyo, Japan, where her father was stationed after World War II. They lived in a small American community there. The way Lowry describes it, the fenced-off community shared some traits with the community in which Jonas lives: It was comfortable, familiar, and safe.

But, like Jonas after he begins receiving memories, Lowry did not want comfortable, familiar, and safe. Day after day, she rode her bicycle out of the gate that closed off her community. She would ride to an area of Tokyo called Shibuya. Lowry says she loved the feel of the place, "the vigor and the garish brightness and the noise: all such a contrast to my own life." For Lowry, Shibuya was Elsewhere. The river started there. As she grew, Lowry added more memories, thoughts, and ideas to this river.

She added memories from when she was a freshman in college and lived in a small dorm of fourteen young women. Thirteen of the women—Lowry included—were very much alike. They dressed alike, they acted alike. But the fourteenth woman was different. Lowry remembers that she and her roommates didn't "tease or torment" the woman who was different, but did "something worse": They ignored her, pretending that she didn't exist. "Somehow by shutting her out, we make ourselves feel comfortable. Familiar. Safe," Lowry says.

These memories, as well as the remorseful thoughts that followed, flowed into the river.

The river rose when Lowry was sent by a magazine editor to interview a painter who lived alone off the coast of Maine. She and the man talked a lot about color. "It is clear to me that although I am a highly visual person—a person who sees and appreciates form and composition and color—this man's capacity for seeing color goes far beyond mine," Lowry says. She adds that she wished "that he could have somehow magically given me the capacity to see the way he did."

Lowry photographed the man and kept a copy of the photograph, because there was something about his eyes that haunted her. (This photograph is now on the cover of *The Giver*.) The artist later went blind, though he said he could still see flowers in his memory. "Doesn't that make you think of *The Giver*?" Lowry asks.

Over the years, many more memories, thoughts, and ideas were added to the river. There was the time she heard of a crazed killer and felt relieved that he was not in her own neighborhood—then, moments later, felt ashamed to feel such relief. “How safe I deluded myself into feeling,” she says, “by reducing my own realm of caring to my own familiar neighborhood.”

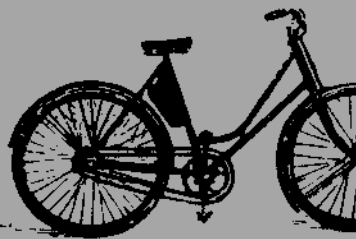
Lowry’s experiences with her elderly parents also added to the river that would become *The Giver*. “Both of my parents were dying when I wrote the book,” Lowry says. “So the topic of memories and the transfer of memories from one generation to the next was very much on my mind.”

Lowry says that though her mother was quite ill, “her mind was intact. She wanted to tell me the stories of her past . . . it was her life she wanted to pass along.”

But her father was losing his memories. During one visit, he pointed to a picture of Lois’s older sister, Helen, who had died of cancer when she was just twenty-eight years old. “That’s Helen,” he’d said. “I can’t remember exactly what happened to her.”

And Lowry thought, *We can forget pain. . . . And it is comfortable to do so. But . . . is it safe to do that, to forget?*

It was from this river of memories, thoughts, and ideas that Lois Lowry wrote *The Giver*.



About *The Giver*

Jonas is always careful about language, trying to choose just the right words. Is he like you in that regard? How important do you think it is to choose just the right words?

Yes, Jonas is like me in valuing the precision of words. . . . (It's part of my job after all, to choose just the right words as I make my way through the writing of a book.) Though because of the world in which he lives, he has no feeling for the beauty of language, or the subtlety it can have.

What do you think is the most appealing aspect about the community in which Jonas lives? What is the least appealing?

I like the safety and comfort of it: the absence of crime, poverty, deprivation, prejudice. But the lack of creativity and imagination is the most troubling aspect to me.

The Giver is one of the American Library Association's most frequently challenged books. What do you say to people who want to remove from library shelves a book that shows just how harmful lack of choice can be?

I sometimes explain to kids, in particular, that people who challenge books do so because they care about children and their welfare. The irony, though, if you think it through, is that they make the world a more dangerous place by taking away freedom. The people who inhabited the world of *The Giver* had made their world very safe, very comfortable. But they had done it by taking away freedom. And there were no books left.

If a reader took away only one thing from this book, what would you want it to be?

The thing I hope readers will learn from *The Giver* is the importance of having choice, and the importance of making good choices.

About being a writer

When do you write? Will you describe a typical day for us?

I work at home, in a room that was once a doctor's office (this house once belonged to a doctor, and his office was attached to the house. I took away all his cabinets and created a wall of bookcases in their place). I go into my office every morning and I stay here all day, unless, of course, I'm traveling.

I sit here [*Lowry answered these interview questions from her office.*] at a MacIntosh computer and put words on a page. I am not always writing fiction—though there is always a book-in-progress in the computer. I have to spend a lot of time answering

mail, doing interviews, writing speeches, etc. But the time with fiction is the time I love most. I write sentences, rewrite them, say them aloud, listen to their cadence, and write them again. I find ways to make them flow into the next sentences and paragraphs . . . to make the narrative move along smoothly; to make the characters seem real. Writing is a solitary occupation, of course, but, for me, never lonely. My head is so populated with my fictional people, and they become quite real to me.

How do you know when you're ready to begin writing a new book?

I think about a book for a long time before I begin writing. It's only when the character comes alive in my imagination . . . when I know where in his story I will encounter him or her, in other words, where the book will begin. By then I know everything that has gone before. But I don't want to start too far back. The best stories begin in the middle of something. In *The Giver*, for example . . . I knew, before I began, what Jonas had been doing for eleven years. But I realized I needed to start on one particular day when he was almost twelve.

How important is reading to your writing?

Reading is absolutely essential. You don't enjoy cooking if you've never eaten good food. And why would you write if you didn't read, and love reading? For a writer, reading is a constant education, as well. You learn from poor writers and you are inspired by great ones.

You've said that you don't read children's books by other authors. Why not?

I find that the fiction I most enjoy is fiction in which I can relate to the main character . . . identify with him or her. That means that I most enjoy fiction about people my age, people who face problems that I have faced, or that I can imagine facing. Of course, having been a child . . . and because I have a good memory of my childhood . . . I can enjoy books for kids. But I have limited time for reading. So I spend it on adult books.

What's your favorite thing about being a writer? What's your least favorite?

I like the solitude of it. I don't think I'd enjoy a job that required constant interaction with other people. Least favorite? The business end of it: contracts, copyrights, etc. Booooring. But necessary, of course.

What do you find easiest when writing? What do you find hardest?

Hmmmm. Have to think about that one. Easiest, I guess, is starting and ending. I always find the beginnings of manuscripts an exhilarating time. And I like (even though readers are always bugging me about the ending of *The Giver*) the conclusions of books: figuring out where, exactly, to end, so that everything important in the book is part of the ending. . . . But at the same time, I don't want the ending to be too neatly tied up, because I want to leave the reader with things to think and wonder about.

And that leaves, as the hardest part, the middle. There is so much to weave in and through the middle. The mechanics of it are difficult at times.

*You are a photographer as well as a writer. How does your photography inform your writing in general, and how did it inform your writing of *The Giver*, in particular? (Aside from the beautiful cover art.)*

As a photographer it is always a question of choosing film, lenses, focus, depth of field, etc. And the composition as well. The same things apply to writing: where to place things, how to focus in on the important things, what to blur. In addition, as a writer . . . I tend to SEE what I'm writing; I go about it very visually.

What advice do you have for children who would like to be writers? What do you suggest they write about?

Read a lot, of course. And think about what you read. That's how you learn what makes stories work. Write for yourself, and to practice how to put things together on a page. Don't think for one second, ever, about "how can I get this published." Think, instead, about the beauty of the language: how it feels and flows, how you can make it say just what you want it to.

What should they write about? The things that trouble them. The things they fear. The things that bring them the most joy.

General

*You've said you were painfully shy as a child. Are you still shy?
How has your shyness influenced the stories you write?*

Yes, I am [shy], but I have learned to conceal that fairly well and to make my way through the necessary public events that are part of my life now. I think being an introvert has made me introspective. I think a lot, instead of talking a lot. Thinking is a very important part of being a writer. And so is observation. I am a watcher of people. It serves me well as a writer.

If you weren't a writer, what might you be?

Well, I would enjoy being a filmmaker, I think. Or a designer of houses. Not an architect—I'm not interested in the engineering and structural stuff. But I love renovating old houses. Right now I'm in the middle of fixing up a house built in 1768. There are paint samples spread out all over my desk.

*What's one thing, besides writing, that you're really good at?
What's one thing that you're really bad at?*

I'm a pretty good cook, and I like entertaining friends . . . that goes along with my love of fixing up houses. I'm a very low-level Martha Stewart type, I think.

And I am SOOOOOO bad at anything athletic. Bad skier. Terrible tennis player. I'm a good swimmer, though, so I'm not completely hopeless.