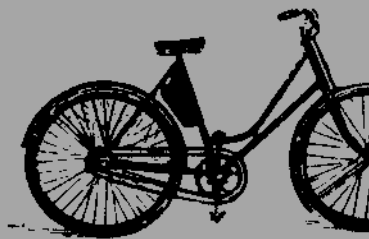


Lois Lowry on Writing



Lois Lowry delights in writing books for young people. “It’s what I do best,” she says, “and it’s what I like doing best.” She has written more than twenty-five books for children and young adults and won numerous awards—including the prestigious Newbery twice—for her work. How does she do it?

“It would be wonderful to be able to describe some ritualistic approach to writing fiction,” Lowry says. “But the truth is so much more mundane. I sit at my desk every day. . . . I type words into my computer. I retype them, rearrange them, and delete them, and retype them again and again. . . . Then I look at the words I’ve written and rearrange them again. Eventually, somehow, a story is put together. There isn’t anything magical. It’s a lot of hard work, a lot of fun, and a lot of waiting for the words.”

Though Lowry has to wait for the right words, she knows a good deal about the book she’s going to write before she begins writing. “Books start in my head long before I start them on my computer,” she says. “Before I ever sit down to write a book, I spend a lot of time going over it in my head.”

When Lowry begins a book, she has “the main characters, the beginnings of the plot, and a sense of the theme. The secondary

characters and the complications of the plot all come to me after I begin writing, and then I follow my imagination through the pages of the book. Parts of it take me by surprise when I'm writing."

Sometimes it's the endings that surprise her. "The characters create the ending," she says. "I only move the characters along and tell what they do. The decisions they make determine what the outcome will be."

As for theme, Lowry says, "My books have varied in content and style. Yet it seems to me that all of them deal, essentially, with the same general theme: the importance of human connections."

It takes Lowry about six months to write a book, and then a little additional time for rewriting. Once she has finished the book and reread it, she chooses a title. "I think a good title should be fairly short, easy to remember, easy to say, and should tell something about the book without revealing too much."

Then she sends the manuscript to her publisher. They usually ask for revisions, which, though Lowry might not like doing them, she does, because she knows revisions make the book better. Revisions usually take about a month, then the book is complete.

By the time one book is published, Lowry is well into writing her next one. Where does she get her ideas? "Ideas come from your imagination," Lowry says. "If you are a writer you are also an observant person. . . . And when you observe something, your

imagination begins to play.” If you are observant, she says, you will never run out of ideas. “I think ideas are there in the millions. The hard part is choosing which idea to focus on.”

For aspiring writers

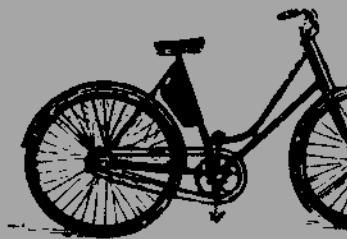
Lowry has two important pieces of advice for aspiring writers: Read and write.

“Read a lot. I mean really a LOT,” Lowry says. “And when you’re reading, think about how the author did things. How did the author create a character who is interesting? . . . How did the author create suspense?”

Lowry practices what she preaches. “Reading is the most productive thing for me,” she says. “If I read brilliant paragraphs, I want to rush out and write brilliant paragraphs. . . . Whatever you read affects what you write.”

And it’s so important that you write. “I always tell children that they should write letters to their grandparents, and they groan when I say that,” Lowry says. “But I don’t mean it as a joke. The best way to write fiction is to write it as if you’re telling a story to a friend. Getting into the habit of writing letters to friends and grandparents is a great way to practice writing fiction. The best fiction has that kind of intimate quality to it. And, if you’re not in the habit of writing with that warmth and intimacy, then your fiction becomes stilted.”

You Be the Author!



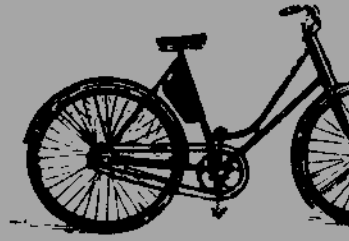
- **Character sketch:** Lowry knows her main characters intimately when she begins a book. She says that she knows “how they dress, behave, talk, react.” You can get to know the characters in your stories in the same way. Think of a story you might like to write. Who are the main characters? Write a character sketch for each, telling how the character dresses, behaves in different situations, talks, and reacts to different things. Does your character have a nickname? What are her favorite—and least favorite—foods? What are his fears, likes, and dislikes? Include in the character sketch everything you can think of to help bring the character to life in your mind; this will help you bring your character to life on the page.
- **To be continued . . . :** Lowry is known for writing ambiguous, or unclear, endings to her books. She does this to allow “readers to create their own answer” to how the story ends. How do you think *The Giver* ends? What happens to Jonas and Gabe? What happens in the community? Write a page—or more—telling how you think the story ends.
- **Keep a journal:** When Lowry was young, she “endlessly scribbled stories and poems in notebooks.” Do the same. Also, keep track of what happens in your life and in the lives of those around you, and how it makes you feel. You may use these notes,

and the memories they evoke, one day. “Everything a writer experiences as a young person goes into the later writing in some form,” Lowry says. “As writers all we have, really, is the memory of our own past combined with observation.”

- **Observe:** Lowry says, “I think all writers are observers and so everywhere I go I am absorbing the details of that place.” If you want to write you also need to observe. Make a point of doing as Lois Lowry does, and try to absorb the details of life around you. If you need help remembering what you see (smell, hear, taste, touch, and feel), keep a small notebook and pen with you and write down your observations.

- **Write a letter:** Follow Lowry’s advice and become a better fiction writer by writing letters to family and friends. The best letters—like the best books—are those that tell great stories. Writing down your real-life stories in a way that will interest friends and relatives will make you a better storyteller when it comes to writing fiction. It will also make you more popular with friends and relatives, as everyone enjoys a good letter!

Activities



- **Make a memory book:** Memories are an important part of *The Giver* because they are an important part of life. Make a memory book to help record some of your important memories. Use a loose-leaf notebook or a book of your own making; whichever you use, be sure to allow room to add more memory pages as additional memories come to you. Begin by making a list of people, places, and events that have been important in your life. Look at each item on the list and see what memory or memories arise in your mind. Then, think of ways to record these memories. You might write a poem, a sentence, a paragraph, even a story; you might draw or paint a picture, or use a photograph you already have. Transfer these memories to your book, just as *The Giver* transfers memories to Jonas. Unlike *The Giver*, however, you'll still have the memories in your head; your book will just be a way to help you remember them, as well as a way for you to share your memories with others.
- **Get a library card!:** If you don't already have a library card, get one—and use it. Librarians will help you find whatever kind of book you're looking for—funny, sad, scary—and even make some good suggestions if you tell them what kinds of books you like.
- **Picture this cover!:** Lois Lowry is an accomplished photographer as well as a wonderful writer; she took the two

photos on the cover of *The Giver*. If you have access to a camera, take a photograph of your own that you think would be a good cover for this book. Illustrate your cover if you don't have a camera. In either case, as you do your cover remember to think about what you want to say with your image, what you want to tell the reader about the book. Remember, too, that your goal should be to make a person want to pick up the book and read it.

- **Bike or hike:** In Jonas's community, the primary means of transportation was bicycle. Only when the citizens visited other communities, which was rare, did they travel by car or bus. Think about how limited your range of movement would be if you could only travel on foot or by bicycle. If possible, spend a day in which you do not get in a car or on a bus or train. See if you can get your family to go along with you in this experiment. At the end of the day, talk about how your life would be different if you always had such restrictions on how you could travel.

- **Winning ways:** Lois Lowry won the 1994 Newbery Medal for *The Giver*. Read one or two other Newbery-winning books and think about what it takes to be a winner. Some recent Newbery Medal-winning books are:

A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park (2002)

A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck (2001)

Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis (2000)

Holes by Louis Sachar (1999)

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse (1998)

The View from Saturday by E. L. Konigsburg (1997)

The Midwife's Apprentice by Karen Cushman (1996)

Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech (1995)

Missing May by Cynthia Rylant (1993)

- **What's in a name?:** Names are very important in *The Giver*. There is a great deal of thought put into naming each newchild. Think about your name. Who chose it? Why was it given to you? Does it have special meaning in your family? You might want to look up its meaning in a book of names. Then, think about this: If you could choose a different name for yourself, what would it be? Why?

- **Become a Receiver of Memory:** Jonas was chosen to become the Receiver of Memory in his community. You can become a Receiver, too, simply by interviewing an elderly friend or relative about his or her past. You might want to find out what it was like to be a child during previous generations. What games did children play then? What did they wear? What did they eat? What was school like? What kind of chores did they do? Did they watch television? What about movies? What were the most popular names? You might want to take notes or tape-record your interview, so that later you can write it all down and share these memories again with your “Giver.”

- **Visit the “old”:** While we don’t have a “House of the Old” where all the elderly go, as Jonas does in his community, we do have many nursing homes where a large number of elderly people live. Many of these people are lonely and have few visitors. You might like to ask an adult family member to arrange for you to visit a nursing home, once, or on a regular basis. In addition

to bringing joy into other people's lives, you might also hear some wonderful memories from way back!

- **What is love?:** When Jonas asks his parents if they love him, they tell him that it's inappropriate to use a word like "love," that the word is "so meaningless that it's become almost obsolete."

Think of someone you love, and find a way—a kind act, a poem, a card—to show that you love them.

- **Color my world:** Research color and light. The Howard Hughes Medical Institute has a Web site dedicated to the subject: www.hhmi.org/senses/b110.html.

- **Words, words, words:** Precision of language is very important in Jonas's world. His best friend, Asher, has gotten into trouble for repeatedly mixing up words, using *distraught* for *distracted*, *boyishness* for *buoyancy*, *smack* for *snack*, and *expertness* for *expertise*. Make a list of pairs of words that might easily be confused. Then, play a game with friends or family members in which you use the wrong word of the pair in a sentence and you see if they can identify the incorrect word, then think of the correct one.

- **Don't forget . . .:** You can learn more about memory at the Exploratorium's online Memory Exhibition. The Web site is: www.exploratorium.edu/memory/index.html.