

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor on Writing



Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's husband has said of his wife, "Writing is as necessary for her as eating or sleeping." Naylor agrees. "I'm not happy unless I spend some time every day writing."

Where does Naylor get her ideas? Early in her writing career, she used to go to a quiet place with a pad of paper and brainstorm things to write about. Now she struggles to keep all the ideas that pop into her head from overwhelming her. She deals with this by starting a notebook for each of her book ideas. "Every time I get an idea about one of these books, I jot it down in the notebook," she says. "There are pockets in each notebook which I fill with photographs, maps, pages from the telephone book, newspaper clippings—anything at all that will help me in the writing of the book."

These notebooks let Naylor concentrate on what she's working on without worrying about forgetting other good ideas she has. They also give her plenty to choose from when she is ready to begin writing a new book. Naylor says that at any given time she might have as many as ten of these notebooks on a shelf beside her writing chair.

Naylor's books are set in all sorts of places, from West Virginia to Maryland to England. The only criteria Naylor uses for choosing a setting is that she has to know it. As a result, many of her books are set in places where she has lived or visited often.

The themes for Naylor's books are usually serious. That's because, Naylor says, "these are the kinds of books I most like to write, serious themes with a lot of hope, humor, poignancy. Because, when you come right down to it, that's the way I see life." The author has also found that she likes to write about regular people. "I love to write about ordinary people in extraordinary situations," she says. Another favorite is poor people, because, she says, "I just feel that poor people are far more creative in some ways than people who have all the advantages."

Naylor doesn't base her characters on specific people, though her characters may possess traits of people she knows, even family members. When Naylor "gives birth" to a character, as she describes it, she begins by writing a character sketch for that character. "I think about them a long time," she says. "I imagine them in various situations and how they would feel." Even with her character sketches, however, Naylor doesn't feel that she knows her characters until she starts writing about them. "You don't *really* know your character until you see him there on the pages," she says.

Naylor spends most of her waking moments writing or thinking about writing, and she wouldn't have it any other way. "There is no other job I would enjoy so much, for in my books I can be

anyone I please—old or young, boy or girl. I can do wildly exciting things I would never dream of doing in real life, and can experience sorrows and terrors that I have always been curious about.”

Naylor can't imagine not writing. “I will go on writing because an idea in the head is like a rock in the shoe; I just can't wait to get it out.” And Naylor has lots of ideas. She is sure that her dying words will be, “But I still have five more books to write!”

For aspiring writers

Naylor stresses the value of perseverance for all writers. In the course of publishing more than one hundred books and two thousand stories and articles, Naylor has received more than ten thousand rejection letters. She received a lot of these rejections early on, before she started writing books. But she didn't let them stop her, they only spurred her to do better. “If I hadn't stuck with it,” she says, “if I hadn't tried to make my next story better than the one before, I probably wouldn't ever have got up the courage to write books.”

The author offers this final word of advice to aspiring writers: “Write the story only you can write—something you can really love or feel.” That's what Naylor does, and it's clearly a winning formula.

You Be the Author!



- **Character sketch:** Naylor usually writes a character sketch for all her characters. A character sketch tells everything you might want to know about the character—even if you never use the information in a story. For instance, it might tell what a character looks like, when his birthday is, what his favorite color is, whether he keeps his room neat or messy, what he likes to do in his spare time, what kind of music he likes, who his friends—and his enemies—are. A character sketch also shows the character in different situations, exploring how he might act and feel, even if you don't use those situations in your story.

Think of a story you'd like to write. Who are the characters? Write a character sketch for each.

- **A different ending:** Naylor had a tough time finishing *Shiloh*. “At every turn, it seemed, in the final chapters and in subsequent drafts,” she said, “I found still another way that Judd might try to trick Marty, another way that Marty could win and yet lose at the same time.”

Can you imagine a different ending for *Shiloh*? There are lots of possibilities. Think of one, then write it.

- **Pay attention:** Naylor is able to tell stories that seem quite real because she pays attention to what's happening around her. "When I'm out in public," she says, "I really pay attention . . . I'm always listening."

You can become a better writer by learning to pay attention. Starting right now, make it a point to pay special attention to all you see and hear around you. At the end of each day, come home and write what you remember about your day. What did you see? What did you hear? Your ability to pay attention will improve with practice—as will your writing!

- **Keep a notebook:** While you don't need to keep a notebook for every story idea you have, as Naylor does, it is a good idea to keep a notebook in which you can jot down ideas for stories, characters, dialogue, and settings as they come to you. That way, when you're ready to write, you'll have a treasure trove of ideas from which to choose.

Activities



- **Book it:** As you read earlier, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor “published” her first books when she was in fourth grade. “I was the author, illustrator, printer, binder, and librarian, all in one,” she said. You can do the same.

First, write a story. (For tips on writing a story, see page 54.) Then, decide how you want to divide your story into sections. You might do this by figuring how much writing you want on each page, or by deciding where you want to include illustrations—at the beginning, in the middle, on every page, wherever you want. Then, print or type the story. Draw your illustrations. Give the book a cover that will grab the reader’s attention, and staple the whole thing together. You can use masking tape or a strip of colored paper to make a binding, as the young Naylor did. And, if you want to be librarian, too, glue half of an old envelope into the back of your book so you can put cards in it to let you know where the book is, and let the borrower know when it’s due back.

- **Get a library card:** If you don’t already have a library card, go 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.

- **Animal careers:** Marty clearly loves animals. He even thinks he might be able to turn this love into a career. He thinks, “I want to be a vet someday,” and “I could be a veterinarian’s helper.” How else could Marty—or you—turn a love for animals into a career? How about as a dog trainer, a groomer, an animal-control officer, a game warden, or a kennel owner, among other things? Choose one of these, or another animal-related career, then do some research to learn more about it. One good way to do this is to interview someone who is doing that job. Ask them what a typical day is like, what kind of training they had for their job, and what you can do at your age to help prepare you to do that kind of work in the future.

- **Cover to cover:** Design a new cover for *Shiloh*. Think about the cover’s “job”—enticing a reader to pick up the book—as you decide which words and images you want to include in your design. When choosing what to illustrate, remember that the scenes that elicited the strongest response from you while reading the book will probably elicit a strong response in other readers. When you’re done, compare your cover with the one on the book and think about which one works better, and why.

- **Bake a chocolate cake:** The day that Marty finishes his work to pay for Shiloh, his mother bakes a chocolate layer cake to celebrate. Here’s a recipe for a chocolate layer cake you and an adult can make to celebrate something in your life—or simply to share the Prestons’ joy at being able to call Shiloh their own.

Chocolate Celebration Cake

Cake Ingredients

- 2 cups flour
- 2 cups sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup unsweetened cocoa
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegetable oil
- 2 teaspoons vanilla
- 1 cup hot water

Icing Ingredients

- 1 stick ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup) butter or margarine
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup unsweetened cocoa
- 3 cups powdered sugar (or more, as needed)
- 5–6 tablespoons milk (or more, as needed)
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

Cake Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350°.
2. Grease and flour two 9-inch round pans.
3. Combine dry ingredients in a large bowl.
4. Add eggs, milk, oil, and vanilla. Mix well.

5. Stir in hot water.
6. Pour batter (which will be thin) into pans.
7. With an adult's help, put the pans into the preheated oven.
8. Bake for 30–35 minutes or until a toothpick inserted into the cake's middle comes out clean.
9. Cool completely before covering with chocolate icing.

Icing Directions

1. With an adult's help, melt the butter or margarine in a large pan.
2. Remove the pan from the heat and add the unsweetened cocoa. Combine well.
3. Alternately add powdered sugar and milk, mixing after each addition, for a smooth-spreading consistency. Add more sugar if the icing is too thin, more milk if it is too thick.
4. Stir in vanilla.
5. Spread on cooled chocolate cake.
6. Enjoy!

- **Go fly a kite:** When David Howard comes to visit Marty the day after Shiloh is attacked, he brings a kite that he plans to fly in Marty's meadow. Marty says the kite tail whipping in the breeze reminds him of how Shiloh's tail wags. Go fly a kite, and see if the tail reminds you of a dog's wagging tail. Before you go, however, remember the rules of safe kite-flying:

- Never fly kites in thunderstorms.
- Don't fly kites near power lines.
- Don't fly kites in places where someone may get hurt.
- Don't fly kites near airfields or roads.

- **Collect cans:** In *Shiloh*, Marty collects cans to make money. Collecting cans is a good way to recycle and make money. Check with a parent before going out to collect. You might even want to organize a can drive in your neighborhood or school, and see how many cans you can collect. Think about something worthwhile you can do with the money you raise. For example, you might want to donate it to your local humane society or another organization dedicated to helping abused animals. (You can research these organizations on the Internet or ask a local veterinarian for a recommendation.)

- **Winning ways:** Phyllis Reynolds Naylor won the 1992 Newbery Medal for *Shiloh*. 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:

Crispin: The Cross of Lead by Avi (2003)

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)
The Giver by Lois Lowry (1994)

- **So you'd like to own a . . . :** Marty quickly learns that there's more to owning a dog than loving it. Many people buy or adopt pets without thinking about the responsibilities of pet ownership and what is involved in pet care. Research a pet you have or would like to have. You can do this by getting books from the library about that pet, speaking with people who own that kind of pet, and interviewing veterinarians, animal-shelter workers, and pet-shop owners. Once you have collected all your information, make a brochure called "So You Want to Own a [Fill in the Pet]" that tells what it is like to own the pet and what care it needs. Include such things as equipment, food, exercise, veterinary care, and grooming. You might want to share your brochure with a veterinarian, animal-shelter worker, or pet-shop owner; if they like it, they can distribute copies to potential pet owners.

- **Earning what you want:** In the end, Marty had to pay Judd Travers forty dollars for Shiloh. Since he didn't have forty dollars, he worked for Judd for twenty hours at two dollars an hour to pay him. Is there something you really want but don't have the money to buy? Talk with a parent about ways in which you might be able to work to earn the money you need.