

# Natalie Lloyd talks to Dan Gemeinhart

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Both **Natalie Lloyd** (*The Key to Extraordinary, A Snicker of Magic*) and **Dan Gemeinhart** (*Some Kind of Courage, The Honest Truth*) are beloved for taking middle-grade readers on extraordinary, enchanting adventures. The pair sat down to discuss the unexpected journeys that children's books, and you, their readers, have taken them on.

**Dan Gemeinhart: I can tell from the amazing way you write that you are someone who believes in the magic of stories. What were your favorite books as a young reader?**

**Natalie Lloyd:** I've been lucky enough to experience some incredible story magic. I grew up in east Tennessee, which has a vivid, beautiful heritage of storytelling. And, of course, books have always been treasures to me. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was probably the first novel I read that made me want to crawl inside the pages. I still check wardrobes and closets and pretty much anything with a door for a passage to Narnia. (You can't convince me that this is weird.) Narnia taught me the power of imagination, and how it can help you through tough days. Even though the stories were fictional, the courage I found in the pages was very real to me.

I was also smitten with Roald Dahl books. That was probably my first experience with magical realism, and it still influences the way I write. *The Key to Extraordinary* is sprinkled with magical realism—flowers do strange and unusual things in Blackbird Hollow, and there's a secret, starry ingredient in the hot cocoa that all the locals drink. But I hope what Emma, my main character, discovers about herself, and her ability to love, is the most magical part of the story.

**Natalie: One element that surprised me is how new *Some Kind of Courage* feels, even though the setting is historical. There's a vintage, Western feel, but Joseph's emotions are so authentic it feels new. What inspired the character Joseph Johnson? Why did you set the story in this particular time and place?**

**Dan:** I'm so glad that you connected with Joseph. I am totally in love with that kid. For me, character always comes first. With *The Honest Truth*, the character of Mark came to me before the story did, and the same happened with Joseph in this book. What makes stories stick with you is not their setting but your connection with the living, breathing character at their center. It doesn't matter if they're a wizard or a cowboy or a princess or a space pirate—if you feel like they're alive and you care about them, you'll fall into the story. Joseph isn't based on any experiences I had, but his central questions, "Who am I and how do I fit in the world?," are the crucial questions of every adolescent, and ones I certainly struggled with (and still do!). As far as the setting, I love history and devoured Westerns as a kid.

**Dan: I love how you said books inspired and transported you as a kid. What do you think makes books special for kids in that way, more so than, say, movies or video games?**

**Natalie:** For me, being able to imagine a character and a world any way that I want them to be is part of what makes a book especially fun. There's a personal connection that comes from filling up the edges of a story with props from your own imagination. A teacher sent me the coolest picture of a diorama one of her students had done for *A Snicker*

of *Magic*. She'd plotted out the entire town, and it made me so happy to think that the landscape of a fictional place might look a little bit different in the mind of every reader. That said, I definitely believe movies and video games also stretch imaginations in awesome ways. Something I've noticed when I meet kids at school visits—and when I hang out with my own nephew—is that gamers are especially excited about world building.

**Natalie: *Some Kind of Courage* is the kind of story I picture being read in classrooms. Can you remember a book that you read in elementary or middle school that shaped you as a reader and a writer?**

**Dan:** I loved read-alouds as a kid, and I am so grateful to teachers who manage to make time for them in this age of crazy curriculum pressure and high-stakes testing. Whole-class read-alouds are a great way to build a shared love for reading, and they really help to build a rich, empathetic class culture. The thought of my books being used as read-alouds gives me the happiest of goose bumps!

I vividly remember two read-alouds as a child: *Where the Red Fern Grows* and *Hatchet*. They are both such great stories, with crunchy plots and chewy, emotional centers. I remember being on the edge of my seat for *Hatchet*, and sitting at my desk with tears streaming down my face during *Where the Red Fern Grows*. I learned a lot from both books. As a reader, they showed me how reading can be not just an activity but an experience. As a writer, they instilled in me the importance of a chapter, that each chapter needs to have its own tension, importance, and justification for existing. If a teacher

only reads a chapter each day to the class, that chapter better move the characters and the story forward and leave the reader wanting more. Teachers don't have any time to waste!

**Dan: As a writer, connecting with students and teachers is so fun, and there are so many cool ways to do it these days. What are some ways that you've been able to connect with teachers and students?**

**Natalie:** Like you, I'm always grateful when teachers or teacher-librarians make something that I've written part of their classroom. They've created so many cool activities to go along with *A Snicker of Magic*. As far as personal inter-

action, I love to Skype with classes that have read my books. I've also been able to connect with teachers and librarians on Facebook and Twitter. I think social media definitely has a negative side. But the positive, for me, has been connecting with so many educators who are excited about books. I know we both love the Nerdy Book Club....

**Dan:** Yes! The Nerdy Book Club is an amazing community of readers. Between that and Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and Skype visits, I don't think there's ever been a better time to be an author connecting with readers.

**Natalie: What's some memorable feedback you have gotten?**

**Dan:** One of the most fun and fulfilling parts of being an author is hearing from readers—both teachers and kids. The letters and e-mails and tweets I've received have been both heartwarming and humbling.

As a storyteller, all that you really want is for people to connect with your story on a personal level, to fall in love with your characters and world. By far, my favorite feedback for *The Honest Truth* has been hearing about kids who are "reluctant readers" who say that my book was the first one they really loved and couldn't put down. As an educator who works every day trying to connect kids with books, nothing could mean more to me than that.

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## Discussion Questions

- Natalie describes *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as "the first novel I read that made me want to crawl inside the pages." What do you think she means? Has a book ever made you feel that way?
- Dan says, "Each chapter needs to have its own tension, importance, and justification for existing." How can an author make sure that each chapter he or she writes moves the story forward and leaves readers wanting more? What plot devices and writing techniques might he or she use?
- Why is the feedback that Natalie and Dan each receives so important to them?

## Writing Prompt

Create a town using nothing but your imagination and your own words. Use vivid details and descriptive words to help the reader envision the architecture, the people, and even the smells of your town.