

Varian Johnson talks to Mahtab Narsimhan

In **Varian Johnson's** *To Catch a Cheat*, a group of retired, middle-school con men reunite for a pulse-racing, friendship-making caper. Across the globe in India, two best friends kick off their own quest in **Mahtab Narsimhan's** *Mission Mumbai*. The two authors came together to discuss their writing processes.

Varian Johnson: Describe an incident from your school days that got you into trouble.

Mahtab Narsimhan: I've always been an avid reader. While my friends loved physical exercise, I stretched my imagination. I was fortunate to have attended a private school in Mumbai with access to excellent literature. I'd lose myself in Narnia or the Shire, go up the Magic Faraway Tree or sample Willy Wonka's amazing concoctions.

The catch was, I could borrow only three books at a time. And three books barely lasted three days for me. I perfected a system whereby I had two library cards (by claiming I'd lost one) and would switch them around so I could borrow six books at a time.

I did get caught by the librarian, but given that I'd lied for a worthwhile reason, she allowed me to borrow extra books as long as I promised to return them on time and be gentle with them. That's me confessing my criminal past.

Varian: Only a writer would get in trouble with a librarian! I'm an identical twin, so my brother and I would always pool together to double the number of books we could check

out. And as far as getting into trouble, once, in elementary school, my brother and I tried to switch places to trick our teacher and friends. We wore the same clothes and even practiced responding to the "wrong" name. But I'm a horrible liar—I laughed as soon as one of my friends called me by my brother's name, and we abandoned the idea.

Varian: Do you outline your novels before starting them, or do you figure it out as you go along?

Mahtab: Both, depending on the novel I'm writing. For a stand-alone, I start with a character or a setting and race through the first draft while I'm passionate about the idea. With a series, I tend to write a broad outline for each book and the series arc. I know my final destination, but I leave the route open to interesting detours.

Varian: I was much more of a figure-it-out-along-the-way type of writer when I first began my career. I started by creating an interesting character in an unusual situation, and wrote from there. My first drafts were very messy and often went through huge overhauls. Lately, I've found it is much more useful to plot out my novels before beginning them. I started this practice with my Jackson Greene series, and I have continued being a plotter for my stand-alone books.

Mahtab: Plotting helps reveal plot holes and saves time! Someday, I hope to plot all my books, but when an idea inspires me, I'm impatient to start.

Varian: Is there a recurring theme in your books? If so, what is it and why is it important to you?

Mahtab: Honesty. I believe my readers can handle it, and deserve it. Readers first encounter problems and issues in life through stories. They learn to distinguish between right and wrong through characters they care about. While middle-grade fiction cannot be bleak and hopeless, there must be an element of truth. This is why my stories do not have neat endings but hopeful beginnings.

Varian: Honesty is so important in writing, isn't it? And not just factual honesty—our characters have to be emotionally honest as well. We have to show characters who react to life situations in real ways.

I used to say there wasn't a recurring theme in my novels, but I've changed my mind. All of my novels are "love stories," though not necessarily "romantic" love. I'm much more interested in love between friends, brothers and sisters, children and parents—it's this love and friendship that define who the characters are and who they will grow up to be. I hope readers are thinking about their own relationships as they read about my characters.

Varian: What is the best part of being an author? What's the hardest part?

Mahtab: The best part is the process of creating something out of nothing. Then I get to share my imaginary world with my readers who (hopefully!) love the story as much as I do. It's

powerful and satisfying. The hardest part is revision. And that's why it's important to love what you write. Don't follow a trend but your heart.

Varian: The hardest part of being an author is creating the first draft. I always struggle with getting words down on the page. My characters often want to do anything else other

than show up in their scenes. They're like temperamental actors and I'm the director trying to force them onstage.

But the first draft leads to the best part of the process—revision. Once the book is written, I become less of a director and more of a surgeon—cutting and shaping the story to make it the best it can be. I love how characters change, how they transform

from simple characters to three-dimensional beings. I also love how the plot sharpens and I can expand on my theme using literary devices like metaphor and simile. It's during revision where the magic truly happens.

Discussion Questions

- What is plotting? Why might it be a useful step for a writer to take?
- Why do the authors say that revision is an important part of the writing process?
- What did this interview teach you about writing? Name three key takeaways.

Writing Prompt

Describe an incident that happened at school that got you into a little bit of trouble. What lesson did you learn from this experience?