

I SURVIVED

Behind-the-Scenes Book 11: The Great Chicago Fire



Author Lauren Tarshis and editor Nancy Mercado give you the inside scoop on how the latest book in the *New York Times* bestselling series was created!

PICKING THE TOPICS by Lauren Tarshis



Author Lauren Tarshis

When I first had the idea for the *I Survived* series, I planned to write about events that most people probably hadn't heard much about, like the Great Blizzard of 1888 and the Hawaii Tsunami of 1946. Scholastic loved the idea for a historical fiction series about disasters and other events, but they wanted to begin the series with a highly recognizable disaster, the sinking of the *Titanic*.

I still remember my reaction.

Me: "Titanic? Aren't there thousands of books about the *Titanic*?"

My editors: "Yes! Because every kid wants to read about the *Titanic*!"

Turned out they were right about the *Titanic*—it was the perfect kick off for the series. And when it comes to choosing topics for *I Survived*, we continue to ask ourselves one simple question: What events do kids want to read about?

Lucky for me, the readers of *I Survived* are constantly telling me what they want. I get emails every day—many, many emails—from kids brimming with ideas for the series. And often their suggestions surprise me. Sure, they want stories about tornadoes and hurricanes. They want action and suspense and details. But many also express deep curiosity about events that are big and complex and dark.

They are fascinated by historical episodes that shaped our history, like the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the Battle of Gettysburg. They are willing to travel far and wide in their reading—to Japan to read about the tsunami of 2011, or way back to the year A.D. 79, to learn about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the destruction of the city of Pompeii.

Other topics kids like you suggest? Chernobyl, the Black Death, and Hiroshima. Every day a kid writes to me asking for a book about the Boston Marathon

PICKING THE TOPICS by Lauren Tarshis (continued)

Bombings. Will I write about those events? I doubt it. Then again, I doubted that I would write about 9/11 and the Holocaust, and in the end I was persuaded by the sheer number and intensity of kids' requests for those topics.

When it came time to choose the topic for *I Survived 11*, the team at Scholastic decided to leave the decision wholly up to my readers. We selected three of the most commonly requested topics: The Great Chicago Fire, The Hindenburg Disaster, and the Revolutionary War. Scholastic then created an online contest in which kids could vote. Thousands of kids participated, and in the end Chicago won (not by a landslide, by the way—all of the topics generated lots of votes.)

As I sheepishly admitted to readers in the author's letter at the end of *I Survived the Great Chicago Fire*, I was hoping Revolutionary War or Hindenburg would win (I have a crush on George Washington and have

always been fascinated by dirigibles.) But in the end I loved writing the Chicago book, and the research journey was one of the most interesting that I've undertaken.

And of course this shouldn't have surprised me. One thing I've learned as the author of *I Survived* is that my readers know where they want to go—and that by listening to them, I can't go wrong.



VIDEOS FROM LAUREN! Click to view!



How did you get the idea for the *I Survived* series?



How is it different writing for a magazine and writing a book?

ADVENTURES IN RESEARCH by Lauren Tarshis



Author Lauren Tarshis

When I first had the idea for the *I Survived* series I thought, great—I'll whip these books out in no time. I'd already written nonfiction articles on many of the topics. I have four kids, and I figured that they and their friends could be the inspiration for the fictional characters that would star in each story.

So easy, right?

No!

It turns out that for me, historical fiction is the most challenging genre to write, more difficult than nonfiction and way more time consuming than realistic fiction.

Historical fiction packs a double whammy of work. I have to conjure up a whole fictional world in exacting detail, and then squeeze this world inside a true event. All of this requires an enormous amount of research—dozens and dozens of books, articles, videos, maps, paintings, interviews, and, whenever possible, visits to the place I'm writing about. It's not enough to learn about the event itself. I need to completely immerse myself into the world of my characters so I can make them as realistic as possible.

For my latest book, about the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, I began by reading three VERY thick books on the history of the city. From there, I read through the dozens of first-hand accounts of the fire, collected by the Chicago Historical Society. These incredible stories captured the terror of that day, in the voices of those who ran from the flames, choked on the smoke, and felt blessed to have escaped with their lives.

These voices were ringing in my mind when I traveled to Chicago, where I did further research. Little remains of Chicago as it looked in 1871, but I was able to understand the geography of the city, and walk the streets where my characters Oscar,

Jennie, and Bruno made their terrifying journey through the smoke and flames. I imagined streets crowded with horses and wagons, sidewalks made of wood and raised up off the ground. I took a boat trip along the river, and plotted out the journey that my characters would take as they ran for their lives. I actually fell in love with Chicago, which is beautiful, and pulsing with the same energy that many early travelers noticed when they arrived there by steam train.



The author at the Chicago History Museum

ADVENTURES IN RESEARCH by Lauren Tarshis (continued)



Lauren Tarshis with Chicago research books

I came back from Chicago with a suitcase filled with yet more books and magazines. I needed to learn about orphanages of the 1870s, train travel across the prairie, early American painters, and gangsters of the American west. Answering even simple questions often takes hours of research.

But the research is actually my favorite part of creating this series. By the time I finish writing each book, I really do feel like I've taken a trip through history. And the best part is that I get to take you along with me.

VIDEOS FROM LAUREN! Click to view!



How much of your writing is based on real people and events, and how much is imagined?



How do you go about researching and planning a story?

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT by Nancy Mercado



Nancy Mercado, Editor of *I Survived The Great Chicago Fire, 1871*

Most people think that being an editor means correcting an author's grammar and spelling. Of course, an editor *can* fix grammar and spelling, but that's mostly a copyeditor's job. (A copyeditor is the person who reviews the manuscript *after* an editor.) So what does an editor do? Well, basically we act as the author's trusted first reader, making sure that the final book is as satisfying as it possibly can be and that it reflects exactly what the author wanted to convey. We look at the **pacing** of the story, or the speed at which the action moves along. (Does the story drag in parts? Or does it go so quickly at times that a reader might gloss over what just happened?) We look at the **characters**. (Are they likable? Are they doing and saying things that feel believable?) And finally, we look at the **language** that the author is using to describe a scene. (Is it clear and fresh and exciting? Will readers be able see this story like it's a movie in their mind?)

Being Lauren Tarshis's trusted first reader is the best because Lauren cares so much about each and every word in her books; she's not afraid to keep revising until they're just right. (She actually revises several times before she even shows me the manuscript!) Here's what the editing process look like on an *I Survived* book:

- 1) Lauren sends me her first draft and I print it out. (I don't like reading on a computer screen so I make my notes on paper.)
- 2) I write a lot of questions and comments in the margins. Sometimes I add a smiley face or two. It's important that Lauren know how much I like a scene or a line, otherwise she might cut it in the revision process!
- 3) Lauren and I sit down and chat about my notes and she goes back and revises on her own.
- 4) Then we repeat steps 1-3 a few more times. (For *I Survived the Great Chicago Fire, 1871*, we repeated this back and forth at least four times!)
- 5) Once we are satisfied that the story is more or less ready for more readers, we pass it along to the copyeditor who makes any necessary grammar and spelling corrections. The copyeditor also fact checks all of the research. (For example, on the Chicago Fire book, the copyeditor checked that Lauren had accurately measured how long it would take for Oscar and his family to reach Chicago from Minnesota. Indeed, she had!)

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT by Nancy Mercado (continued)

- 6) We send the manuscript along to the designer who lays it out in pages like the ones you see in the final book.
- 7) We look it over 2 more times (often finding errors we missed earlier!), a proofreader takes one last look at it, and then it's done and off to the printer!

With the Great Chicago Fire story, Lauren and I spent many weeks talking about the main character, Oscar, and his relationship with his mother's new husband, Mr. Morrow. We knew that Mr. Morrow was going to play a big role in the book, especially towards the end, and that it was crucial that readers liked Mr. Morrow and didn't think he was a bad guy. But it was also important that readers understood that it was because of Mr. Morrow that they were moving to this new city and how Oscar had mixed feelings about that. There's one scene in particular in Chapter 2 that Lauren continued to revise and polish over the course of several drafts. The scene is where Oscar and his mother and Mr. Morrow are on a train heading to Chicago for the first time. Here's how it appeared in the very first draft:

Oscar closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the window.

"Are you feeling alright, son?" Mr. Morrow said.

Oscar cracked open his eyes, and tried to sit up straight.

"I'm fine, sir."

"Such a long trip," Mama said, her freckled face bright with excitement. "I feel like we're about to land on the moon!"

Mr. Morrow chuckled and gave Mama one of the dreamy looks that Oscar hated.

No wonder Oscar felt sick.

It wasn't the train or the heat. It was *him*, Mr. Morrow.

Mama's new husband.

Oscar's new...

No, he wouldn't even think it.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT by Nancy Mercado (continued)

Mr. Morrow wasn't a bad guy. And anyone could see he made Mama happy. Probably Mr. Morrow wanted to make Oscar happy too. Fat chance. It was because of him that Oscar was on this train, that he was moving away from the Minnesota farm where he'd spent his whole life.

Of course this whole nightmare started two years ago, when Papa was killed.

And now here's the scene as it appears in the final book:

Now that they were getting closer to the city, and Oscar couldn't bear to look. He slouched down in his seat and glued his eyes to his dusty boots.

"Are you feeling all right, Oscar?" Mr. Morrow said.

"I'm fine, sir," Oscar lied.

"Such a long trip," Mama said, her freckled face shining with excitement. "I feel like we're heading up to the moon!"

Mama and Mr. Morrow both laughed, but nothing seemed funny to Oscar. So much had happened these past few weeks. He was in a state of shock. Mama had married Mr. Morrow. They had sold the Minnesota farm where Oscar had lived his entire life. And now they were moving to a strange city that might as well be the moon.

No wonder Oscar felt sick.

Of course the real nightmare had happened two years ago, when Papa died.

He was killed in a vicious blizzard, a wall of ice and snow and wind that slammed into their

Do you notice the differences between the two versions? The first change that stands out to me is the first line. Lauren began by writing "Oscar closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the window." And then by the time we'd gone through several revisions, that sentence had changed to include so many more details. Oscar is now "slouched down in his seat" and he can't even bear to look out the window to see the new city he's about to inhabit. His hesitation about all of the changes

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT by Nancy Mercado (continued)

happening in his life is much more evident and we have a vivid picture of who Oscar is and how he's feeling in the final version, don't you think?

Another big difference is how Oscar describes Mr. Morrow in the first draft as someone that makes him sick. By the final version, what's troubling Oscar is much more the fact that he's had to leave behind his family farm, and we get the sense that he is slowly warming up to Mr. Morrow. That seems like a small detail, and it's only a few lines, but it makes a huge difference in how we perceive Oscar and his relationship with Mr. Morrow (which will definitely have an effect on future scenes later on in the book).

Revision can really change so much, even how you feel about a character! Have you had to revised a piece of your own writing? What was the hardest part?

IT TAKES A VILLAGE by Nancy Mercado



Nancy Mercado, Editor of *I Survived The Great Chicago Fire, 1871*

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and that's certainly true for books as well. One very important person in the *I Survived* "village" or family, is illustrator Scott Dawson who has worked on the interior illustrations for each and every book in the *I Survived* series. Scott's warm and expressive drawings help bring Lauren's stories to life, and (we think!) they add another layer of enjoyment for readers.

Since we usually know a little bit in advance the topic for the next book, the first thing we do is let Scott know the event and the time period so that he can research the topic before he gets started with his drawing. For the *Chicago Fire* book, he needed to know things like: what kind of firefighting equipment did firefighters use in 1871? What did the city of Chicago look like at that time? Of Scott's work, Lauren has said: "One of the great delights of the series is seeing how Scott brings my characters to visual life. His research brings in historical details that I don't even mention in the book, like clothing styles, building styles, etc."

Usually we send Scott a list of possible illustrations for the book and then he chooses from that list what he would most like to draw. Here's a glimpse of part of the list we sent him for the *Chicago Fire* book:

Full page drawing: Firefighters fighting the blaze. (Note: We'd like to give readers context to understand how fires were fought in the late 1800's, and give them visual context for what the streets and city looked like at that time.)

Half page drawing: Jennie, Bruno, and Oscar scooping up water from the barrel, smiling and connecting. (Note: Bruno should be wearing a purple velvet lady's hat smudged with dirt, the wide brim all crushed from previous chapter.)

Several weeks later, Scott sends his preliminary sketches to the designer, Yaffa Jaskoll, and she and I look them over. Here are two examples of the terrific sketches that Scott did for the *Chicago Fire* book. You can see that these are pretty tight drawings. In other words, we can get a pretty clear sense of what the final illustration will look like from these.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE by Nancy Mercado (continued)



In this drawing, we really wanted readers to both feel the intensity of the situation AND get a clear sense of how fires were fought at that time. Scott totally nailed it! (Go to page 79 in the book to see the final illustration of firefighters fighting the blaze.)

For the sketch of Jennie, Bruno, and Oscar, we loved how Scott showed them all from above, so you could see Bruno's reflection. That was a clever way of approaching the scene, wasn't it? (Want to see the finished piece of art? Check out page 58 in *I Survived the Great Chicago Fire, 1871!*)



We publish an *I Survived* book every six months, which may sound like a lot of time, but it really isn't! As soon as Lauren finishes one *I Survived* book, she's on to the next one, and that means there's not much time for Scott to pack up his paints from the last job and get started on the next one. Next up, Scott will get to work on his drawings for *I Survived the Joplin Tornado, 2011*. As always, we can't wait to see what he'll come up with.

JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER by Nancy Mercado



Nancy Mercado, Editor of I Survived

The great thing about working on an established series is that the covers all have a similar look that readers will recognize, so the process of creating the cover can be pretty straightforward. Notice I didn't say easy! So what goes on behind the scenes of an I Survived cover? First, the designer of the series, Yaffa Jaskoll, contacts the illustrator Steve Stone who has worked on every book in the I Survived series and sends him a general summary of the book, the time period, and a description of the main character and what he should be wearing.

I work so far in advance on the cover, most of the time we don't have a finished manuscript to share with Steve, so he has to go on our summary of the book. In the case of the Chicago Fire book, we decided that the cover should feature the main character in a boat as he's escaping the fire. That meant that Lauren had to be sure to keep the scene where Oscar is in a boat otherwise our cover image wouldn't make much sense!

Then, Steve sends over some possible models that he'd like to use. Every book in the series so far has featured an eleven-year-old boy, so Steve and Yaffa look for boys who are in that age range, and who match the description of Lauren's main character. Fun fact: They have never used the same model twice, so every cover features someone new.



Once Steve has completed his photo shoot, he sends us some sample images and Yaffa decides which one will work best with the design. We love how realistic Steve's work is, and how he puts the main character right in the center of the disaster in a way that feels immediate, terrifying, and true to life.

JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER by Nancy Mercado (continued)

Yaffa also tries to keep in mind how the cover will look when it's seen with all of the rest of the books in the series, and she works hard to make sure that they look different enough, both in the colors that are chosen and in the pose of the model. Here are all of the I Survived covers at a glance. Do you have a preference for one over the other? Why?



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