

Author finds success writing from the heart

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Saturday, 03 February 2007
Last Updated Tuesday, 27 February 2007

Nora Raleigh Baskin is a writer who specializes in writing young adult books. The lessons she shares in this article are important for every writer of every genre. You want to write a book. That should be first and foremost in your mind. Thoughts of how to publish, as you'll see, are secondary to your process of writing. Enjoy, and please heed Nora's wise advice.

Nora Baskin Encourages You to Write From the Heart

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My first published novel was bought by the first editor to read the manuscript, but it took a while for me to get there—after years of mailing out manuscripts, numerous cover letters and queries; after years of phone calls, conferences, continuing-education classes and critique groups; and after many rejections.
Breakthrough

It took one particularly awful rejection to point me in the right direction. After a full year working and reworking a collection of short stories for an editor at Simon & Schuster, I received in the mail a package with all my stories and a very nice letter of rejection.

"[Blah, blah] ... not as confident that we would be the right home for the book ... [blah, blah, blah]."

I cried so hard and for so long that my family thought I had received news of a death. There was, however, something this editor had said to me during one of our early phone conversations that later gave me the courage to pick myself up off the floor and write again. She said, "While we are talking, do you have any other ideas or projects?"

"Sure."

"What are they?"

(Pause.) "Well, I've always had this idea to write a novel about a little girl whose mother dies, but ..."

"But what?"

"Well, there are a million stories like that ... where the mother dies or is dead. It's been done."

"Maybe ... but only you can tell your story."

For me, what finally worked was that I stopped trying to get published and I wrote

the story I had always wanted to tell but thought I shouldn't—the story of a girl growing up without a mother. It was just slightly this side of semi-autobiographical, and I had been writing it in one form or another since I was in sixth grade.
What I learned

There were several reasons I hadn't tried to write and publish this particular story earlier. First, I believed that the shelves

were filled with a hundred too many books of middle-grade fiction in which at least one parent dies or is dead. So instead of writing a similar story, I tried to find a marketing void and fill it.

That was a mistake. It takes so long after acceptance for a novel to be published that trying to predict the market is nearly impossible. It also contributes to forced and unauthentic writing. Second, I believed that the story (involving a mother's suicide) was too sad for a middle-grade audience.

But the real reason was because I wasn't ready.

After my short-story collection was ultimately rejected, it took about a month for the pain to subside enough for me to begin writing again. This time I wrote from the heart. The decision was perhaps nothing less than sheer desperation. I had nothing left to lose. I wrote using the skills I had learned and practiced as an adult but with the vulnerability and heart of a sixth grader. And I did it without thinking about whether or not anyone would publish it.

I wrote the story I had always wanted to tell. I wrote it for myself.
Advice on How to Write a Book

Read all kinds of books—young adult books, middle-grade books, adult books. Reading great books is the best education. Even reading not-so-great books. Figuring out what works, what doesn't. At what point does the story fall apart or get boring? Or at what point do you forget that you are reading a story? Listen to the significance of a single word, a beautiful sentence, a perfect observation.

And keep it simple by finding the story you want to tell and sticking to it.

I also found that reading my work aloud in a critique group was invaluable. Even if you are alone, read aloud to yourself. You'd be amazed what your eye passes over but your ear picks up. After all, writing is by definition a form of communication. The purpose of communication is to be read, to be heard. The key is to do it well enough that someone hangs around and listens.