

*An interview with Cynthia Lord, conducted by Robert Redmond, moderator for the Real Writing Teachers listserv, 2005.*

**Robert: Share with us your background as a writer.**

I've always loved books, but I didn't begin writing regularly until high school when I wrote plays, poetry, family newspapers, and even serialized novels that I passed around to my friends while my algebra teacher was checking homework.

During my college years, I won several writing contests and had short stories and articles published. After college, I became a teacher and wrote four learning units (all out-of-print now--though I still get mail about them occasionally, even 15 years later).

I returned to fiction writing when I had my own children. My daughter loved the *Redwall* series when she was in the fourth grade, but wished there were similar stories set in Maine (where we live). So I wrote her three books for fun, a chapter a day. Some days, she'd sneak up behind me and read over my shoulder while I was sitting at my computer writing that day's chapter.

I've always loved middle-grade fiction and in 2000, I decided to try writing a middle-grade novel. I followed the advice of "write what you know" and wrote about a family like mine (though the characters are not my actual family--my husband wants everyone very clear on that point since the father in the story is not always likeable ☺).

I have two children, one of whom has autism, and *RULES* explores that family dynamic.

I have written a second novel that won both a children's writer contest last year and a grant from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). That book is called *HALFWAY BETWEEN HOPE AND HURRICANE* and features a girl who wants to be a lobsterman like her father. "Hope" and "Hurricane" are islands in the story and the water between those islands is the family's fishing grounds.

I have a more detailed biography on my website (including goofy pictures): [www.cynthialord.com](http://www.cynthialord.com)

**Robert: What are some of the challenges unique to writing for children?**

One challenge is that writing for children involves pleasing both adults and children. Adults have had more life experience, so a story has to be fresh enough to appeal to an adult editor and book buyer, and yet, still speak to a child.

I write from my heart, but a book is also a commercial product and it can be hard to juggle all those needs and concerns. In the end, I really can't--I have to write the story I have to tell and hope I eventually find an editor and publisher willing to take a risk for that particular book.

I also feel a responsibility in writing for children that I didn't feel so strongly when I wrote for adults.

**Robert: If you were teaching a group of elementary children, what would your writing workshop look like with kids? What would you like to see them doing to develop their "craft" in writing?**

I would want my workshop to follow the writing process: a dynamic, interactive brainstorming time with ideas bubbling up and spilling over, then settling into the choices a writer makes once an idea is chosen. I would show how each choice a writer makes defines the next one. A plot has "rules" and once a writer is comfortable with that, a dramatic story is the result. We would create a story together, beginning with a character and a problem, then asking the questions I always ask myself when sculpting a plot and bringing characters to life.

I would also show examples through my own first novel's evolution and revision--I think it's helpful to see how part of the writing process is failure and struggle and having to start over, as well as joy and success.

**Robert: Where do you get the inspiration for your stories/books?**

RULES came from a desire to explore my own feelings about having one foot in two worlds: one of "special needs" where my family is defined and challenged by that label and the "regular" world. Straddling those two worlds is a challenge for everyone in my family.

After RULES, my other books have begun with setting. I taught on an island in Maine and that is the setting for my second book. I grew up in New Hampshire, and the White Mountains of NH is the setting for my third book. I love land and water and dramatic places, and I ask myself "who lives here?" From that question comes a character, from that character comes a problem which creates the conflict in the story. Within the problem is a central question and the answer to that question is the climax of the book. So once I have those things settled for myself, it becomes a journey traveled with that character from the question to the answer.

I am fascinated by certain things and they show up in every book I've written. One thing that interests me is how the places we live shape whom we become. Another is how we define ourselves through our families and the people we're with. So those fascinations are often part of the conflict in my books.

**Robert: Writers have various ways of collecting ideas/information/words/phrases/etc. Many use writer's notebooks. What systems do you have in place for collecting these things?**

I carry a small notebook in my purse for those moments when I have an idea or some words jump to mind that I don't want to forget. I often take a notebook with me to my setting and write down images, sounds, and smells. I think of myself as a pickpocket, collecting scraps of places and people for my stories. My visual memory is good, but there is nothing like standing to my ankles in a chilly, fast-running river to remind me that sight is only one of the senses (and sometimes, it's not even the strongest sense in a particular setting).

If possible, I silently act out my scenes in my setting to check timing and to experience a moment through my skin. All these impressions, descriptions, and thoughts are collected in my notebook to help me remember what I was thinking or experiencing. Often, things surprise me in a setting--how loud a waterfall is or how powerful the seaweed smells at low tide.

**Robert: Any interesting writing related quirks you care to share?**

Oh my. I could do a whole week on this question alone. ☺

I collect objects for each book, so my desk is always covered with bits of birchbark, granite beach stones, lobster-fishing tools, etc. I hold a story's objects while I'm thinking. Wrapping my fingers around a smooth-worn river stone, taken from a river in NH where I've set my third book, brings me inspiration and it also makes the story feel tangible and real. That helps me ground a story.

Another quirk is that I name things. Names define, but also limit something to only what it is, instead of a vague cloud of everything I might worry about.

So I've named my internal editor Mrs. Cathcart. She's very bossy and if I let her hang around while I'm writing a first draft, she's always peeking over my shoulder, tsk-tsking, telling me I'm doing it wrong. So, I imagine sending her off on a Carnival Cruise when I begin a new book. Mrs. Cathcart has enjoyed the Bahamas, Barbados, Mexico. . . .

I also have two unusual muses. I often write at a college library near my house, and inside the front doors are two huge portraits of men who went to college there: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Nathaniel Hawthorne gives a dead-on stare in his portrait that goes right through me, and I imagine him challenging me to *Dare!* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow has a far-off sadness in his eyes, reminding me to *Imagine*.

*Imagine* and *Dare* are perfect words for a writer. Walking into the library, I always glance at both portraits and make the silent promise I will do my best at both.

## **Robert: What do your drafting-to-revising steps look like?**

I write a first draft without revising or looking back--I call it my Pickett's Charge method--just keep your head down and RUN!

I say to myself, "There's time for editing, but that time is not now." So I open a blank page, and I don't stand up from my computer until I have a chapter written each day. It doesn't matter if I'm feeling inspired or not, I just push ahead.

In fact, I love this quote:

**You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club. ~Jack London**

Novel writers often define themselves as "plungers" and "plotters." Plungers dive headlong into a story and see what happens. Plotters plan out the book ahead of time. I'm somewhere between those two: I plunge for about four chapters to discover the characters, the problem, and the relationships, but around Chapter 5, I usually get stuck. That's when I stop writing and plot the story.

My first drafts are always too short. My first editor said once there are "adders" and "subtractors" when it comes to writers. Adders need to flesh out their books after a first draft and subtractors need to cut and pare down to find their best story. My first drafts usually come in around 80-90 pages and I generally end up with 130-150 by the end of my revisions. In that first draft, I write what interests me most. I love conversations so my first drafts are spare on details and big on dialogue.

Once I have a first draft, I call Mrs. Cathcart back from her cruise and we begin revising. At that point, I'm sculpting the elements, making the language flow, correcting the pacing, layering in the setting, and expanding the descriptions and reactions of the characters. Often, there are new scenes to write, but it's never as intimidating as writing a first draft because now I know the characters well enough that I could put them into any situation and know exactly what they'd say and how they'd act.

My revision motto comes from one of my favorite artists:

**Go deep, not wide. ~Andrew Wyeth**

I love the challenge of probing deeper through revision, though it is always hard work. Getting a revision letter can feel overwhelming, like looking ahead to a skinny road twisting through a dense woods. First, I panic for a few seconds, fearing I'm not up to that challenge, but any journey is essentially a series of footsteps. By putting one foot in front of the other and opening a chapter, day after day, I am always amazed where I can go—that's where a great editor is worth her weight in chocolate—she hands me the map and is waiting for me on the other side of the trees.

Of course, there might be a *desert* on the other side of the trees. . . but she has a map for that, too (and a snakebite kit).

I write "by ear" and read every chapter out loud many, many times, listening for the rhythm of the language, as well as the meaning of the words. My ear can hear little glitches and awkward places my eye won't see, and I keep moving words and sentences until my voice reads them smoothly.

When I have a whole story in place, I ask for feedback from my writer friends. I consider everyone's suggestions and concerns carefully. Sometimes, I take the advice at face-value and other times, I step back and look past the suggestion to the problem that generated it. The solution might not resonate with me, but it may point backward to a problem worth considering.

It's important to find those readers who will kindly (but bravely and firmly) tell you the truth—even when the hard fact is you need to start over. It's a great gift to find a reader who takes your writing so seriously she'll give you the truth.

However, there comes a point with feedback where everyone simply has personal likes and dislikes and opinions. I can lose the core of a story, trying to please everyone. When I reach that point, it's time to find *one* person to help me.

I send the book to my agent and if she thinks it's ready, it is submitted to an editor. If it's bought or the editor sees promise in it, a whole new round of revisions will begin.

Sometimes, those editorial revisions are very dramatic. I honestly think *RULES* now has only about 5% of the exact, original text Scholastic bought. Characters have changed, some events have changed, etc. I've matured in my writing style, too.

A good editor or critiquer helps the writer reach the full story the writer wants to tell. I've been incredibly blessed to work with editors who know how to ask questions that push me past where I could go myself.

**Robert; Tell us about your published work. How do you see your books being used in a classroom setting?**

I have a book discussion guide on my website for *RULES* and four reproducible worksheets so far.

I think my book will lend itself to discussion as it's about friendships and honesty, and we are all challenged, whether those challenges have a disability label or not—it's a universal human experience to be flawed and yet, love and grow in spite of that.

**Robert: What question do you WISH I had asked that you would like to now address?**

I would simply like to add that any creative process is individual. I never mind talking about books I'm currently writing, but I know writers who find that very uncomfortable or who feel it takes away their desire to write. There are also writers who write a chapter and perfect it before moving on. They have little revision to do at the end of a first draft because they have edited as they wrote. I find it hard to keep switching writer and editor modes, so I write a whole draft without looking backward until I've reached the end.

“Honor your own process,” is really the best writing advice. The process itself is a great teacher, and my best work is accomplished when that stays my focus. Nothing is wasted--every attempt teaches something, even if that attempt ends up in the trash bin or is wiped clean by the delete button.

It all matters.