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## From imagination to publication: Perspectives on becoming young authors/ illustrators of books for children

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**H**ave you ever wondered what it would be like to be a child of eight or a teenager and have a book of yours professionally published? On several occasions I have had this thought but particularly when working with my elementary or middle school students as they created books from their stories. Recently, I had the opportunity to explore this topic with authors/illustrators who have been professionally published within the past five years—and at ages which range from eight to eighteen. I asked them questions which included: How has your life changed because your book was chosen for publication? What do you particularly like/dislike about being a published author/illustrator? How has another book, author, and/or illustrator influenced your work? The trends that emerged across their answers indicate to me that their award-winning books for children resulted from their going where their imaginations took them, countless hours at the drawing board, endless revisions, balancing responsibilities, and being treated seriously by encouraging adults.

The young authors/illustrators that I interviewed are twelve of the eighteen first-place winners (1992-1997) of *The National Written and Illustrated By ... Awards Contest for Students* and include the Gold Award winner from 1992. They entered their books in one of three age categories: 6 to 9; 10 to 13; or 14 to 19. Then a national panel of educators, editors, art directors, and authors and illustra-

tors of children's literature selected their books as worthy of publication. They were awarded publishing contracts and professional editors and art directors assisted them in preparing their books for publication.

### **How life changed once published**

It was having the opportunity to speak to students like themselves in schools across the United States that these authors/illustrators viewed as the major change in their lives after being published. Some discovered that they had a love for teaching, of seeing others excited about learning and who are motivated to work on their own projects using their imaginations. Many found that being published opened doors to future publications, gave credibility in their chosen career fields, and helped them reach other personal goals. As one student stated, "The opportunity to do other books is a lot of fun. ... But I feel my reward comes in getting to go speak all over the country. There aren't many jobs that offer the gratification of seeing first hand the impact of your work—to see other kids realize that they, too, can write and illustrate children's books."

### **Making the decision to write for publication**

These young authors/illustrators drew inspiration from each other's work and were motivated to build on their prior writings and illustrations to produce a publishable final product.

Two of the young authors/illustrators claimed that becoming a published children's book writer/illustrator had been a prior goal for them. However, most of these young authors/illustrators were students who wrote and drew extensively and/or were required to create a children's book at school and decided to "go for it" since they had done most of the work anyway. While the possibility of winning a national book award was motivating, it was the challenge that seemed more important to them. As one said, "I thought [their books] looked really cool so I wanted to do it, too."

And what exactly does "doing it" entail? The following section summarizes these young authors/illustrators' responses to my interview questions. Also, provided are brief descriptions of their award-winning books.

### **Meeting the young authors/ illustrators:Hearing their perspectives**

CARSON, DREW. (1998). *Summer discovery*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

In Drew's story, *Summer Discovery*, two nine-year-old boys have more exciting adventures than they thought possible when their original "super plan" for the summer must be changed. Drew's realistic illustrations not only show the boys making and protecting an important archaeological find but also reveal their special friendship .

Drew, age ten, remembers, "It was hard at first [creating this story], but once I got going with the book, it started to 'flow,' both with the writing and with the pictures. ... After I wrote this book, other ideas came to me for other stories." Looking at and reading books like *The Adventures of Tintin* and the *Hardy Boys* also "gets me imagining and thinking of adventures ..."

SHERMAN, ERICA. (1998). *The mists of Eden--Nature's last paradise*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

Erica's *The Mists of Eden--Nature's Last Paradise* reflects her concern for the survival of tropical rainforests. The rainforest, shown in detailed paintings, speaks for itself in poetic text. Additional facts about rainforests inform the reader.

For this thirteen-year-old, bringing the book to publication "was a lot of hard work

and required a great amount of dedication but was also an exciting experience. ... Meeting the deadlines, while at the same time maintaining the quality of the work, was a difficult endeavor because I still had all of my school work to complete." She continues, "the thought that people everywhere will be reading and enjoying my work is especially rewarding."

RIGAMONTI, JUSTIN. (1998). *The pigs went marching Oout!* Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

In rhythmic, rhyming poetry and action-filled cartoon illustrations, Justin tells of when *The Pigs Went Marching Out!* Pesky, a discontented pig, entices his fellow pigs to march from their pleasant home to "where there's fun and thrill after thrill." Returning home, they encounter danger but are saved by Farmer Joe, who forgives contrite Pesky.

Eighteen-year-old Justin remembers not only "all the hard work, depressing at times" when putting together his book, but also "delight and joy." He recalls "when my mom read a rough copy to my little cousin and she was giggling and laughing the whole time." Justin finds "the long process of editing and refining" a book is just something he'll have to get used to. He says, "I love to create things ... to look at a story I've written or a picture I've drawn and smile and laugh and have fun. ... I have always wanted to make my work as fun as that of Dr. Seuss."

WHITNEY, ALEXANDRA. (1997). *Mouse surprise*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

In Alexandra's *Mouse Surprise*, a house full of very busy mice scurry about to make a very big surprise for someone. The reader watches them try hard not to wake the cat. This causes entertaining results shown in colorful, detailed illustrations.

This ten-year-old young author/illustrator remembers "how hard I worked to get *Mouse Surprise* done in time ... and how tiny I drew my mice." She found working with an editor challenging because "he wanted to change my drawings when it wasn't needed." However, "I love drawing and making up stories." She likes drawing because "there is no right way to do it." Alexandra has "learned a lot from Nancy Carlson, who draws Louanne

Pig—like how to make my animals show emotions ...”

McHALE, GILLIAN. (1997). *Don't bug me!* Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

While Leanna, the main character in Gillian's *Don't Bug Me!*, definitely does not enjoy insects, Gillian's readers will delight in her humorous drawings of the pesty creatures and Leanna's, dealing with bugs, bugs, bugs that invade her tree house and threaten to ruin her summer.

At twelve years of age, Gillian has had two of her books published. When writing/illustrating books, she remembers, “Hard work!” However, “If you want to achieve something, you have to be willing to put in the hard work, even when you get discouraged.” She finds it difficult when people assume that she's different from other kids. “They seem to think I did this because I'm smarter and more talented. Mostly, it's my willingness to put in all the hard work.” She emphasizes that she has “really enjoyed meeting other kids across the country who love to write and draw.”

MAW, TAYLOR. (1997). *The incredible jelly bean day.* Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

In *The Incredible Jelly Bean Day*, Dean purchases a bag of jelly beans which triggers a succession of wild adventures for him which no one could have predicted. Taylor's computer illustrations are as incredible as Dean's ensuing day.

The first thing nineteen-year-old Taylor connected to authoring *The Incredible Jelly Bean Day* was “hard work ... Also, it was a lot of fun to write about anything or anywhere that my imagination would take me.” Ever since reading Dr. Seuss' books, he has “liked going off to far away places and rhyming.” However, Taylor has found book length limitations very challenging. “The paper doesn't seem big enough to put down all my thoughts and ideas. It is hard to simplify ...” Once the book was published, Taylor enjoyed “seeing the children's reactions to the pictures.”

RIPHAHN, ANNA. (1996). *The timekeeper.* Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

What would happen if you lived where there was no time? In *The Timekeeper*, Anna

illustrates such a land, in chaos. A mysterious person, new to the town, establishes order by dividing days into day and night and hours into minutes. Colorful, detailed scenes illustrate this verse narrative.

Time to work on books is one of the challenges sixteen-year-old Anna finds as a young author/illustrator. *The Timekeeper*, as a twenty-one month project, “was without a doubt a labor of love [considering] all the difficulties of dealing with the pressures of a ‘fulltime’ job and carrying out my education.” However, Anna “will continue the writing and illustrating if it means I can go on speaking [to diverse groups].” She finds this most rewarding. Her immensely detailed illustrations have been inspired by Graeme Base's *Animalia* and *Eleventh Hour: A Curious Mystery*.

ESTLACK, MICHA. (1996). *Darius, the lonely gargoyle.* Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

Gargoyles are supposed to be inanimate, grotesque figures carved in stone. In *Darius, the Lonely Gargoyle*, Micha creates an engaging, stone gargoyle that is alive and has a problem. A boy, who has his own physical challenges, attempts to help Darius fly. The results are extremely entertaining.

Now twenty years of age, Micha is a professional puppeteer who remembers “the enormous amount of work that went into creating Darius and his story ... But all in all, I feel that the memory of the publication process is [that it was] both educational and rewarding.” However, “Being an author carries the danger of being pigeonholed ... Another difficulty I find isn't so much a difficulty but a hazard. Because I am a published children's author, care must be taken in some of the other things I do ... I have a [children's] book, so whether I want to admit it or not, I am a role model ...” S.E. Hinton, teenage author of *The Outsiders*, was a kind of role model for Micha while Japanese animation and comics, *Anime and Manga*, have affected Micha's illustrating.

BARRON, KATHRYN. (1995). *Critter crackers, the ABC of limericks.* Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

Though designed for young children, any lover of limericks will enjoy Kathryn's *Critter Crackers, the ABC Book of Limericks*. The

alphabet comes alive in clever limericks and amazingly entertaining illustrations.

Because writing and illustrating a book takes so much patience and dedication, twenty-year-old Kathryn says, "... if I were given that author's contract again, I don't think I would be as quick to sign it, but I still would sign. When I colored my first picture [for *Critter Crackers*] ... I knew it was all worthwhile. There was a certain finality in coloring—I knew it was the last opportunity I had to influence the 'lives' of my characters. I really did think of them as alive, and that affected my final product; they look more alive." Mercer Mayer and Maurice Sendak inspired her work because they, too, both wrote and illustrated their books.

PEDERSEN, KRISTIN. (1994). *The shadow shop*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

Kristin uses a parable in rhymed verse to tell the story *The Shadow Shop*. Unusual collage illustrations show young Thelma McMurty deciding to trade her shadow because she believes that she will be happy forever. However, all does not happen as planned.

Now twenty-three years of age, Kristin reflects, "The thing that stands out most in my mind about writing and illustrating [*The Shadow Shop*] is having accomplished something I thought I could never do ... at least until I was forty or something! Seeing the finished book and speaking to young people who aspire to be authors has really been an encouragement to reach for other dreams of mine ..." A Suzy McKee Charnas series "sparked the idea for my book because of the interplay of the forces of darkness and light." Kristin sees in real life "how good and evil are intertwined" so she thinks "picking up this theme was something I really wanted to do in both my book's story and illustrations."

KENDALL, BENJAMIN. (1993). *Alien invasions*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

In *Alien Invasions*, Ben wears his new superhero costume and sees some remarkable creatures from outer space—rather cute invaders. However, Ben wants to be rid of them and his attempts to do are hilarious. All is portrayed in vivid color.

Benjamin, now a thirteen-year-old, remembers "doing all the revisions [of *Alien*

*Invasions*] and also meeting [with adults] and how helpful they were." He still travels a lot for speaking engagements and finds it challenging "to keep up with the information I get on new authors that I use in my presentations to schools." Being a published illustrator is a bit difficult when people think that he can "instantly create an illustration." Benjamin adds, "I never had any drawing or writing classes, except those in public school. I'm not all that talented, but I work hard for what I want. And if I can get a book published, anyone can. All it takes is effort."

WILLIAMS, TRAVIS. (1993). *Changes*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc.

A raven peers down from the branch of a tree on the dramatic cover of *Changes* by Travis. What does it see? Does it know why a teenage boy's classmates are missing? Will the boy find his way out of the web of lies and frightening changes in his world?

Currently twenty-two years old, Travis remembers it seemed "simple and fun" creating the original *Changes*. However, "producing the final product [for publication] was a different story altogether ... It was the first time in my life I had ever focused utterly on a single creative project with such a sustained amount of energy and urgency. It was, in many ways, not fun. But there was a larger sense of satisfaction at the idea that I was slowly constructing a very serious and polished final product." He also discovered that the "tension about creative control between author and editor—both of whom may be right in some ways—is one of the more difficult things about being an author/illustrator." Around the time of *Changes*, "I was becoming very interested in comic book artwork ... I was fascinated with the combination of text and graphic media to create a narrative ... The possibilities inherent in the 'graphic novel' format remains one of my passions ..."

JONES-BABB, AMY. (1993). *Abracadabra*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions, Inc. Gold Award Winner.

In *Abracadabra*, a fantasy adventure story, a young girl finds a way to rescue her somewhat eccentric aunt from the evil Sultan of Zabar. Both story and illustrations seem magical and include a gleaming, white unicorn.

While Amy, now twenty-four years old, doesn't recall one book that influenced her, she remembers several old books she'd check out from her school library over and over again. "For a while, I really only looked at the pictures. Then I realized that the story enhanced pictures in a way that cannot be described."

Remembering creating *Abracadabra* evokes the following from Amy: "Actually, my story revolved around characters that I liked to draw. Whenever I wrote a segment of the story line, I could see the actual characters dancing about my head like animation. From this, I gained more self-confidence in writing. The characters just acted out their drama and I was more or less just a reporter. Sometimes, your imagination can come up with some pretty strange and wonderful situations. I just tried my best to not get in its way. Let it go, and you will catch up with it somewhere down the road!"

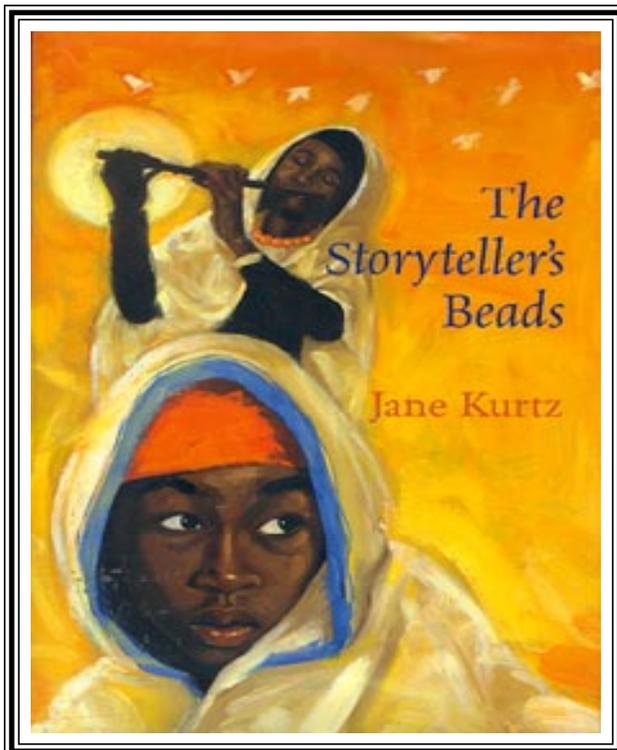
#### **A final message from the young authors/illustrators**

My last interview question for these young people was, "Is there anything else that you would like *The Dragon Lode* readers to

know?" Among other things, they want readers to know that much of their encouragement and inspiration came from teachers and librarians; that authors and illustrators can also get children excited about reading and writing; and that good writing/illustrating takes time, patience, and dedication regardless of one's age or experience. However, the rewards are worth the effort "ten times over."

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