Interview with a school kid: HONEST answers on writing, school, and life

written by Holly
November 26, 2014
By Holly Lisle

I got the following email this morning.

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If you wouldn't mind, I would like to ask a few questions about being an author.

1. Why did you decide to be an author, instead of something like… A coach?
2. What made you interested in being an author?
3. Would you suggest to other people, that they should be an author?
4. What books should I start reading? (I like fantasy, but I know to read other types too), (also, what are some of your favorite books to read?)
5. What are some of the (more) important subjects in school, for being an author?

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It was from a school email address, which in general means the kid is doing homework assigned by a teacher, and I have a standing policy on BEING HOMEWORK assigned by a teacher.

However, there was a single word in one question in that little list of five that really got to me. (I'm not going to tell you which one, but you'll figure it out.)

So I decided to do the interview with the kid—and more, I decided to tell him the truth, which is something I guarantee he hears from adults just about never.

In my experience, adults talking to kids are gawdawful liars now in about the same percentage that they were when I was a kid. Truth from an adult was like the single gasp of fresh air in a room filled with fart.

So here's what I told him.

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1: Why did you decide to be an author, instead of something like… A coach?

I didn't decide to be an author. I was going to be a famous artist, or maybe a musician.

Tried both of those, and discovered they made great hobbies, but I hated them as jobs. So I went to nursing school, and worked as an RN, mostly in the emergency room and intensive care units, for ten years.

But four years into my nursing career, when my own children were two and three years old, two children who had been in a horrible accident were brought into the ER where I was a nursing supervisor. I ran the code on one, the ER RN ran the code on the other. In spite of everything we could do, both of them died, and their parents lost both their kids that day.

I realized that they could have been my kids, and realized that I needed a different job—one that kept me where I could be with my children.

I'd always loved to read, and was certain I could write better stories than most I read. So I spent every spare minute of my free time, when my kids were at school or asleep, writing fiction. I was terrible at it in the beginning, and got more

than 100 rejections from publishers before I sold anything. But I taught myself, trying new things, figuring out ways to do what I wanted to to better, and most of all, I never quit.

Five years later I sold two poems, and then my first novel. That novel went on to win the Compton Crook Award for Best First Novel, and I went on to sell every single thing I wrote for the next seven years straight—something that almost never happens. I still sell very well.

The year after my first sale, I got a three-book deal from my publisher, and quit nursing to write full-time. I've been supporting my family by writing ever since.

2: What made you interested in being an author?

Never having to run a code on someone else's kid for an hour, begging the kid the whole time to hang on, to live, to just not die so he could go back to his mom and dad.

Knowing I could do it and be good at it.

Loving books.

Needing to be close to my kids.

3: Would you suggest to other people, that they should be an author?

There's no such thing as "should." Do not EVER do something because someone else tells you that you SHOULD do it because you'd be good at it, or because you "owe it" to your parents, or to society, or to the world.

The only reason you do something is because you love it, because it matters to you, and because you know that you can do that work well, and that by doing THAT work, you will enjoy your life and make it meaningful to yourself. You don't owe your parents, your school, society, someone else's expectations of you, or the world anything.

4: What books should I start reading? (I like fantasy, but I know to read other types too), (also, what are some of your favorite books to read?)

I read everything. In fiction, I read fantasy, science fiction, westerns, horror, suspense, romance, books written for men, books written for women, and everything else I can get my hands on.

In nonfiction, I read predominantly history and science, but I also research anything that interests me, no matter how odd.

5: What are some of the (more) important subjects in school, for being an author?

I learned two things in school that actually applied to my career as a writer.

One was how to think scientifically by using the scientific method:

- Ask a question
- Create a hypothesis
- Predict what will happen
- Test the hypothesis
- Evaluate the results

I used this process to teach myself how to write fiction. How to raise kids. How to use a computer. How to create a business on the internet. How to fix problems that came up at all points in my life.

The other thing I learned in school that was actually valuable was that if I wrote one page every day, I would have my notebook filled by its due date, and would not fail my class.

I discovered that's the way you write books, too. A little bit every day, not everything all at once.

Otherwise, school was just as useless when I was a kid as it

is now. It prepares people to work in jobs in an industrial society (which no longer exists in this country) and in "service industries"—in other words, to get a job flipping burgers at McDonald's or ringing up sales at Wal-Mart.

And college is just an expansion of school—the vast majority of college graduates do WORSE on general knowledge testing than they did as high-school graduates.

If you want to do something cool with your life, you're going to have to learn to do it on your own time.

You're going to have to find people who know how to do what you want to do, take courses if they offer them, ask them to take you on as a trainee—whatever you have to do to learn what they know.

And you're going to have to work HARD. **You are going to have to learn how to fail,** because we learn new things and create new things by failing until we finally succeed. Until you can fail at something, get back up and try to do it again, only better, you will never accomplish anything.

Furthermore, you are going to have to learn how to persist. I told you about the more than 100 rejection slips I got before I started selling anything. That was more than one-hundred times that I failed—that people told me I was wasting my time, that friends and family said I'd be better off just sticking with the thing that I was already doing.

That was more than one hundred times over a period of YEARS that I had to tell myself, "This is what I want, and what I want my life to be matters to me."

I won—and writing is the best job on the planet. At least for me.

I wake up every morning joyful that I get to do this—that I get to go to MY kind of work, sitting alone in front of a

computer, telling myself a story that delights me, knowing that not even I know how it ends yet…but I will.

Whatever you end up doing, I hope that it's something you love. Something you fought for and earned. Something that makes you happy to get out of bed every day to do, because you get to have the fun of working hard at something wonderful that matters to you.

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