

Newspapers in Education's Interview with Jennifer Ziegler

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NIE: DO YOU EVER READ THE NEWSPAPER TO GET IDEAS?

JZ: I'm usually not actively searching for ideas. (I have so many already I'll probably never pursue them all.) But I have serendipitously found quite a few of my ideas in newspapers. I love to read profiles on amazing individuals, or stories about the unusual situations people find themselves in. Even a "standard" news item can turn on a light bulb above my head. I might see something and ask myself, "but what if X had happened instead of Y?" Especially if you use your imagination and ask "what if," "why" or "how," a newspaper is a treasure trove of writing topics.

NIE: HOW DO YOU STAY CURRENT WITH WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THINKING/DOING?

JZ: Well ... I'm normally interested in the same things as them. (I'm not sure what that says about me and my mindset.) For example, I love TV shows like Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Veronica Mars. I read young adult novels. I thoroughly enjoy films like Superbad, Juno and Napoleon Dynamite. So I'm often in their universe anyway. In addition, I read several y/a blogs and do as many school visits as my schedule allows. I also have young people living in my house, my kids, one of whom is a young teen. Even though they might not always listen to me, I try to listen to them.

NIE: YOU HAVE A JOURNALISM DEGREE AND WORKED FOR A WHILE AS A FREELANCE REPORTER. HOW DID THOSE EXPERIENCES HELP YOU WITH YOUR CURRENT WRITING?

JZ: Journalism is a terrific field of study if you want to write. My studies and freelancing experience taught me several key things about the craft, such as the importance of a strong beginning and ending, how to do research, how to use quotations, how to keep your writing well-paced so that your reader doesn't get bored, and, most importantly, how to meet a deadline! If any young person wishes to have a career in writing, I would strongly suggest that they work for their school paper or literary magazine. This will give them practice at coming up with ideas, finding their own style, and publishing. Plus they will learn how to manage their time and work with editors.

NIE: WHAT WERE YOU LIKE IN HIGH SCHOOL?

JZ: I'm not sure how others saw me, but I saw myself as a regular kid trying to make the best of things. My social group was with the drama kids, but writing is where I excelled. I worked for the school paper and competed in UIL competitions. I suppose others also saw this as a major part of my identity, because now when I flip through my old yearbooks I find so many references to it in my friends' notations.

Things like, "I'm sure I'll see you anchoring the news" or "I know I'll see your name in print." As far as popularity? Again, hard to say. I feel that I was fairly well-liked, but I was not a queen bee. I was intrigued by the power that came with popularity, but I don't think I wanted it enough to pursue it. Nor was I confident enough to have it come naturally. I had good friends, a social group, and a few interesting pursuits-all the things that kept me coming back every morning. That was sufficient.

NIE: DID ANY PART OF HOW NOT TO BE POPULAR COME OUT OF YOUR OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCES?

JZ: Um, yes and no. The story is very loosely based on my good friend Christy, who also moved around a lot when she was young. But Maggie, the main character, isn't Christy. And her family and overall circumstances are different. I'd probably be lousy at writing biographies, because even when I start out writing about real people, they morph into entirely new characters in new situations.

I didn't live Maggie's story either. However, I think all novels are somewhat autobiographical. Everything is filtered through a writer's personal experiences and belief system. So I suppose if someone wanted to, they could deconstruct my books and find all sorts of subconscious allusions to my past.

NIE: WHAT IS YOUR PROCESS OF WRITING?

JZ: Usually it's a character that comes to me first, someone with a problem. From that I outline a story and write several sample pages to test out the voice and mood. My editor has suggestions at this stage, and I revise the outline quite a bit before I start writing the manuscript. Once we are ready to go, the real fun begins. Composing the first draft is my favorite part. This is when I can write without too much awareness of the assignment at hand. Of course I follow the outline closely, but I try not to dwell on audience or marketability or even my own prose. I simply set down the story as I see it unfolding in my mind. It's tough to explain-sort of like simultaneously watching and directing a movie. When I'm done my editor gives me another round of good suggestions and I begin rewriting. This is a different from first-draft composition. This requires complete awareness of your craft: mechanics, pacing, clarity, consistency. It can be difficult to tear up your previous work, but it's very necessary. I try to think of it as emergency surgery. After rewrites, I go through the edit and galley stages-my last chance to find and fix errors-and then I bless it and send it on its way. The whole process, from idea to final acceptance, usually takes about a year for me.