Dream Jobs: Children's author

By Hailee Romain, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.08.18

Kathleen Benner Duble is an author living in Boxford, Massachusetts. She writes books for children and adolescents and specializes in historical fiction novels, which are made-up stories based on true events in history. Her young adult stories take place in a wide range of time periods, including the Salem witch trials, the French Revolution, the Age of Exploration and more.

What first sparked your interest in being an author?

I was in third grade and I wrote this very short story about a piece of paper that gets dropped into a pile of leaves. Looking at it now, it's really a pretty bad story. But when my teacher gave it back to me she said, "You should really think about being a writer," and that was it. That's what I wanted to do from third grade on.
Can you walk me through the process of developing and writing a book?

The first step is getting a story idea. That idea can come from just about anywhere: a story someone tells you, a person you meet, or an article in a newspaper or magazine. Many times, inspiration can even be sparked by a personal experience you or a family member has had. For example, I had an ancestor who was tried as a witch in the Salem witch trials. Her story prompted me to write my book "The Sacrifice."

Once you're ready to sit down and start writing something, it's a good idea to start by making an outline. That will help structure the beginning, middle and end of the story and make it easier to stay on track as you write. But even with an outline, I find that the story often takes on a life of its own, which means that characters may take some unexpected turns along the way.

What happens once you've written the first draft?

For me, that's when the editing process begins. It usually occurs in three stages. First, I'll finish the initial draft and put it away for a few weeks. When I pull it out, I tend to notice flaws or plot points that don't quite work, so I change them and put the story away again. I repeat that process until I think, "OK, this is as good as I can get it."

After that, I usually give the story to people I trust — my family, friends or peers in my writing group. They may read it aloud to someone else and then I get their critiques back and make changes based on their recommendations. You should always give the draft to other people to read because you can sometimes get too attached to the story and miss big problems, like certain characters not being relatable.

Finally, once the story gets bought by a publisher, the editor will often have changes as well. They may even ask you to change large portions of the story. It's a lot of work, which is why sometimes it takes up to two years to write a book and two more years for it to get published.
What are your favorite and least favorite parts of writing?

My favorite part is when I first get an idea. When I start writing, I get very excited about my characters and the journeys on which they’re about to embark. The other part that I love is seeing a new book cover. It's very interesting to see the vision that the artist has had of my book.

My least favorite part is editing. Editing is tough. You have in your head the way the story is supposed to be, but the editor may have a different vision or interpret the story a different way. It can be difficult to change a story once you’ve worked so hard on it and become invested in the characters.
How do you deal with criticism?

It's still really difficult, even for me. When I first get feedback from an editor, I'm always devastated. They basically just tell you what they see as wrong with the book and what they want changed before they'll publish it. The thing you have to remember is that they do love the story, otherwise they wouldn't have bought it. But it's still difficult to have someone critique your work, especially when it feels like you're pouring your heart out on a page.

So I've learned that it's best to put the feedback away for a while after reading it, and once I've gotten over the initial shock and sadness I pull it back out and think, "Okay, let's look at this a little bit more realistically." Usually, the feedback is right.

You have to have a thick skin to be a writer because you're going to get criticized by everybody. You can't take it personally or think your writing is bad. You just have to frame it as "this person is helping me grow as a writer."

Do you ever have writer's block?

All writers get stuck at some point. When that happens, I go do something else for a while, like clean or take a walk. Your mind will keep working in the background and suddenly an answer will usually just spring into your brain.

If I'm really, really stuck, I'll go to the movies, because I can usually get ideas there. In fact, Captain Jack Sparrow from "Pirates of the Caribbean" helped inspire one of my favorite characters!

Can you describe a normal day at work?

Like many people, I do my work in an office. The difference is that my office is in my home. It can get lonely working by yourself all day, but the best part is that I can make my day be what I want it to be — and I can work in my pajamas!

All writers have a different process. Some are most creative at sunrise while others are in the late evenings, but I usually start work around 8:30 in the morning and work on new material until about 2:00. Then from 2:00 to 5:00, I'll do research for a new book, answer emails or read. Reading is a huge part of the job of being an author because you have to know what's on the market.
Why did you choose to write children and young adult fiction?

Honestly, I think it chose me. I love writing historical fiction for young adults because I truly enjoy what I'm creating. I enjoy crafting the characters and finding interesting ways to approach history through a lens that people may not be familiar with.

While I also like writing books for younger readers, I still find picture books to be very challenging. People think picture books are simple so they must be easy, but it's the opposite. It's almost like writing poetry, where you have to convey a sense of a story in as few words as possible. Every single word counts!

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

Yes! The most important thing is to read all the time and to start to think critically about what you're reading. Start to figure out what you like when you're reading. Is it character development? Plot twists? Dialogue? You'll start to see what makes your heart sing when you read it.
Secondly, you don't have to wait until you're an adult to start writing. There are lots of kid-focused magazines and online publications that accept stories from young writers. Try to get something published and start building a resumé.

Don't be afraid to try. Just keep writing over and over again. Writing is just like anything else. You can't walk into a hospital and immediately be a doctor, right? You can't be a writer without a lot of practice, either.
Quiz

1 Read the introduction [paragraph 1].

How effective is the introduction at introducing the topic?

(A) It is effective because it identifies the person being interviewed and explains what she does.

(B) It is effective because it explains the positive and negative sides of being a children's author.

(C) It is not effective because it doesn't specify the type of books the author likes to write.

(D) It is not effective because it fails to give the reader the main idea of the article.

2 What is the MAIN reason the author includes the section "How do you deal with criticism?"

(A) to teach kids how they could become writers

(B) to convince readers not to let editors read their work

(C) to help editors learn how to give better feedback to writers

(D) to explain a difficult part of being a writer

3 The author wrote the article mainly to explain what being a children's book author is like.

What did the author do to illustrate this point?

(A) The author described the process children's book authors must go through to publish a book.

(B) The author explained how hard it is for children's book authors to hear criticism.

(C) The author asked a famous children's book author questions about different aspects of her job.

(D) The author told readers what steps they need to take to become a famous children's writer.
Read the following paragraph from the section "Can you describe a normal day at work?"

Like many people, I do my work in an office. The difference is that my office is in my home. It can get lonely working by yourself all day, but the best part is that I can make my day be what I want it to be — and I can work in my pajamas!

What is the author's MAIN purpose in including this paragraph?

(A) to show how Duble's job is different from most jobs
(B) to explain why Duble has trouble writing in pajamas
(C) to persuade readers to get a job that they can do at home
(D) to highlight how Duble makes sure she doesn't get too lonely