

Ask the Author

Mrs. Hayes's third grade class in Nashville, Tennessee
asked author, Heather Sutherlin, about writing & publishing
August 2012

1. How did you get the idea for your book?

I had a beautiful dream that was a little bit scary at the end. You see, I was this girl, dressed all in white, standing with a bunch of people near a waterfall. People were splashing and playing in the water and I laughed because they were grown-ups but acting like kids. I looked up to say something about it to my friend, who was the prince, but I saw a man in a black cape coming down the hill to attack him. So, I ran to stop him from hurting my friend the prince. I jumped in front of him and then... I woke up.

2. When did you start working on this book?

Well, I woke up from this dream and couldn't stop thinking about it. I wanted to know what happened. I wanted to know how I became friends with a prince. I wanted to know who the girl in white was since she didn't seem very much like me and I thought it was weird that she thought she could fight a big bad guy like the one in the black cape. So, I got up out of bed and found a notebook and started writing notes. I thought about it all day long and most of the day the next day. Then, I put it away. About a year later, my brother, who is a writer, said to me, "You should write a book. Let's both write books in November for National Novel Writing Month." So I did. I wrote the whole book just to see what happened next.

3. Was your book rejected before it was published? If so, how many times?

Oh Yes! Many times! I tried for a whole year to get it published and I received 14 rejection letters. Many agents wouldn't even respond to my letters. They didn't think my book would make any money, so they didn't waste their time writing to tell me so. It was very depressing. I actually gave up trying to get published. BUT, I did not give up writing. Once I realized I could write a book, I wanted to keep writing books. It felt good. So, I wrote another and another and another.

4. How did you find a publisher?

Actually, I never did find a publisher. I gave up, remember? But a funny thing happened. My brother had written a lot of really good books and he had been trying for many years to get published and then one day he decided to publish his own books. Now that many of us have computers, we can publish books for ourselves. So, my brother figured out how and he made so much money that was able to quit his job! Then, he taught me how to do it, too. Now I am writing every day and this year I plan to publish three books all on my own. That is called self-publishing, but most of us call ourselves Indie Authors because we are independent, we don't rely on publishers.

5. Did you type your book on the computer? If so, what program did you use?

What a clever question! I started out writing in a notebook. Nearly all of my stories start in a notebook. Then, I took the pages I had written and typed them into the computer using Microsoft Word so that I wouldn't lose them. Also, it is easier to add more or to edit if you are using a computer. Then, when I started really writing on my book during National Novel Writing Month, I used Google Docs because I could easily share my work with friends or family and I could save it at home, go on a trip somewhere and open the internet and be able to see my document no matter where I was or what computer I was using. Isn't that cool? Now I use Word, but I save everything I do in Google Drive so that I can still reach it from any computer.

6. Why did you choose that candle for the cover? Was there an illustrator?

I chose the candle as a symbol. The girl in my story is very special and she is asked to do something really unique. She is supposed to tell the people she meets about the god of light who wants to help them. While she's trying to do that, the god of darkness is trying to stop her. So, she is like a little candle in a very dark place. If you blow out that one little candle, then the whole place will be dark.

My sister is an amazing photographer. I asked her to create the cover for me so that I could tell people that my family is awesome (because they are) and because I trusted her to make the cover the way I wanted. She did a great job and she is going to create all the covers in this series.

I met a girl who is a very talented artist and I asked her to read my next series which is about a few kids who wander through a portal into another world and follow a wizard to fight a mean woman who has kidnapped his queen. She read the book and loved it, so she agreed to paint a cover for my book. I think she did a fabulous job and I wish you could see it. I have the paintings hanging in my office and soon my sister will take special photos of them and turn them into a book cover on the computer. Isn't that amazing?

7. Do you keep a notebook or something else to record ideas for your books? How do you come up with new ideas?

I do keep a notebook. Actually, I keep a LOT of notebooks and pens everywhere. I also carry an iPad with me, but when I have really good ideas, I take out a notebook and start writing. Sometimes I end up writing in really funny places like in the middle of the grocery store or at the pool while I'm dripping wet. I just don't want to forget my ideas, so I hurry to jot them down.

All of my big ideas have come from dreams. I have very vivid dreams that I call "movie dreams." It is like I'm watching a movie. I can see all the characters and hear them talk and usually I can even feel the main character's emotions. I watch them go through something amazing like falling in love or running from some bad guy or searching for a treasure. Then, when I wake up, I can't stop thinking about it and wondering what happened next, so I write it down. I almost never dream about real life, so all of my stories are fantasy in some way. I once dreamed about Africa, but then the characters were attacked by alien cat monsters, so... I guess my dreams are never normal.

8. Was it fun making your book?

YES! The most fun I have ever had, I think. I don't write like most writers. I write to find out what happens next, so I don't have the whole book planned out like you are taught in school to write. (Sorry, Mrs. Hayes) So, writing for me is like reading a really good book. It is the book I most want to read and I can't wait to find out what happens. Will they be saved? Will they get what they wanted? I don't know, so I keep writing. And the best part is something most people don't know about writers: The characters will surprise you! Sometimes you are thinking they will do one thing and then while you are writing all of a sudden they are doing something else and you sit back, staring at the screen and say, "Huh. Why did you do that? That messes up everything!" And it's kind of amazing. Like they are alive and you have to try to keep up with them. So, you start writing again and try to get them out of whatever they just got themselves into. It's my favorite part of writing.

9. How did you come up with your title?

As I was writing, I was spending a lot of time thinking about my book. One day I was reading the Bible, which I try to do every morning, and I got to a place where Jesus is talking about being the light in the world that is full of darkness. I sat and thought about that for a while and realized how much my character is like that. So, then I started looking for other places where the Bible talks about light and darkness. Pretty soon I had a long list. I ended up using a lot of those ideas in making my books for this series. All of the books originally had titles that were from the Bible and all of them have the same theme. Light changes the darkness, pushes it back so that we can see things, but the darkness is constantly threatening to put out the lights.

10. Does your story relate to your life?

Well, it is a fantasy, so... not entirely. However, since I am a Christian, I am trying to do what Jesus said about being a light in a dark world. So, in that sense I am a little like Merrillyn, the main character. Mostly I just wish I could run around in fantasy lands saving people from danger and healing them magically like she does in the book. Wouldn't that be cool?

11. Did you download your own book? :)

Haha. After my book was converted from Word into the ebook file, I was able to load it onto my iPad and read it as a kindle book. That way I could check to see if it looked okay and make any changes before customers bought the book. So, I didn't have to pay for it. But, my husband and our daughter downloaded it on their phones, so we have a copy everywhere we go. My book just went to paperback and people can order it on Amazon, so I am going to order a big box of them and take them to a few schools here in Little Rock that can't afford to buy books. Then, whatever is left will probably ride around in the car with me so that I can hand them out to people I meet who might help me sell them, like bookstore owners, librarians, or book reviewers.

One more thing: When I was little I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't understand how many people it takes to make a book arrive in a book store or library for me to read. Even though I self-published, it still took a lot of people to make it happen. I had my cover designer/photographer/artist, my editor who helped me make the book even better, a formatter who turned it into the different formats for Kindle or Nook and cleaned up messy spaces. Then, when it is all finished, most people also hire someone to help them market the book. Selling a book is very different from writing one, so sometimes we need help. But the best help of all is the reader. A reader who loves a book will tell all their friends about the book. When you love a book and you tell a friend, "That book was awesome! You should go read it!" you are sharing that love with the author. Even though you never meet the author, maybe you don't even remember their name, you are giving them a precious gift. Because each book that sells is money that helps that author write for another year. Each book that sells says to the author, "someone loves your books, so keep writing!" If you love an author, if you love their books, then tell a friend. I always give books as Christmas or birthday presents because then I am sharing what I love with someone else and in the meantime I get to encourage an author somewhere to keep writing.

And for those of you in this class that wish you could write amazing books. Keep trying. Writing is fun, but it is work, too. Just like you have to practice to become a better soccer player or a better singer or a better artist, you have to practice if you want to be a better writer. Even now I am working hard to become better. I write every single day. I edit every single day. I read books about how to write, I talk with other writers and with editors and with teachers who teach people to be writers or editors. I am all grown up, but I am just now really learning how to be a true writer. I wish I had started when I was young. So, if you want to be a writer, if you have wonderful ideas for stories, grab a notebook and carry a pencil with you and WRITE!

Happy reading and writing!

Love, Heather