

## **Authors Speak About Their Writing Processes**

The following summaries are based on interviews with various children's book authors that took place in the fall of 2024. Writers were asked questions about their writing process, such as, "Would you call yourself a plotter, a pantsier, both, or neither?" and "Can you describe the process you use when setting out to write a manuscript?" Some writers responded via email and others participated in phone interviews. Their responses are summarized below.

**Kathi Appelt**, winner of the Newberry Honor and a National Book Award Finalist, and author of *The Underneath*, calls herself a "storyteller," in lieu of calling herself a "pantsier" or a "plotter." Kathi takes a hybrid approach to writing, letting new stories wander around on the page, as well as inside her head, for "a good long while" before she starts to "winnow out the emerging story." Kathi free writes when she is stuck and often uses outlines, though the outlines are flexible and often come late in her process. Kathi can write up to 30 drafts of a manuscript and completion of a manuscript can take years.

**Gennifer Choldenko**, winner of the Newberry Honor and a Carnegie Medal Nominee for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, and author of the NYT best-sellers (with Katherine Applegate) *Dogtown* and *Mouse and His Dog*, says that every book is different. She tried to outline, but "stank at it," and because she is comfortable with ambiguity, she looks like a pantsier, even though she's not. Now, when she doesn't know where the story is going, Gennifer makes lists. Lists of ideas of what could possibly happen at that point in the story. When she does outline, Gennifer uses John Truby's steps from *The Anatomy of a Story*. Still, she doesn't use these steps until she has a first draft either complete or close to complete. Gennifer also does exercises to help her

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understand her characters better, like discovering what is inside a character's purse. She says "there's no one process" and that "every book is different." Above all, she has faith that she will get to the end, regardless of her process, and says that writers should listen to their intuition when they are writing.

**Sharon Darrow**, Pushcart Prize Nominee, winner of the Oklahoma Book Award, educator, and author of *Worlds Within Words*, *Rainbow a Poem*, and *Trash*, describes herself as a "listener." She usually begins a manuscript by "pantsing" her way through, though at some point she does stop to work on structure, plot, thematic throughline, etc. Sharon says, "I have tried the extreme planning method and worked up character sketches and chapter summaries, drew maps of the area and the houses, etc., and once I was finished I had no impetus to write the book. I'd already learned what I could from it and there was no room for surprises. I love surprises even when they throw a monkey wrench into the process. For me that sense of a mystery to be solved when writing is the delight and reward for doing this work." Sharon does make cursory plans, though she likes them to be incomplete, and before she begins to write, she tries to get into a dream-like/trance-like state. Once she's finished a draft, she begins to look at it more analytically, often using Scrivener to help her organize her material.

**Stacey Lee**, winner of the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association award, the PEN Center award for best YA, the Northern California Book Award, and author of *The Downstairs Girl*, *Luck of the Titanic*, and *Under a Painted Sky*, is more a pantster than a plotter, though she does use rough plotting, especially when she's deeper into a manuscript and has to work out a pathway to the end. Stacy says her outlines are constantly being rewritten, so

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a strict outline never quite works for her. She wants to leave room for the unexpected twist that she couldn't see coming beforehand.

**Ann Jacobus**, author of *The Coldest Winter I Ever Spent*, a finalist for the Northern CA Book Award for Young Adult Fiction, started as a pantsler, but found it “led to a big mess.” Now she describes herself as a planster (a combination of plotter and pantsler). Ann puts signposts in place she so knows where the story is going, but gives herself freedom to explore as she begins a rough first draft. After finishing that, she goes back to put in more structure. Though her process may vary from novel to novel, some activities she relies on include side-writing, brain-storming, and character studies to help her know her characters better. Ann also says that it’s important for every writer to find their own process

**Lindsay Lackey**, winner of the California Book Award for Children’s Literature, recipient of Best Book of 2019 by the New York Public Library, the Denver Library, and Children’s Book Review, and author of *All the Impossible Things* and *Farther Than the Moon*, is a “tried and true pantsler, but that has resulted in a very arduous process for me many times.” Currently co-writing a book with another author, Lindsay is trying to incorporate some of what she has learned about plotting into her pantsing process. Lindsay begins her stories once she has “a strong sense of a voice or an inciting incident or even just a very clear idea for an opening scene.” Then she writes, and rereads, throws away, writes some more, etc. She does this until she has completed a discovery draft, or what she refers to as her “zero draft.” Once she has completed that, she puts it away (without reading it) and starts an entirely new draft. She gets at the heart of what the story needs by side-writing. Lindsay says, “I find I do better thinking about the technical aspects of craft–

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such as narrative arc, plot, structure, etc. – more around the time I am working on a first draft, or the draft draft that I know someone will be reading. Thinking about those things too early can really bog me down. I think I’m a very intuitive writer and therefore can’t let myself get too caught up in the minutia of craft very early on because I will risk missing the forest for the trees.”

**Aimee Lucido** is the author of the middle grade novels *Emmy in the Key of Code* and *Recipe for Disaster*, as well as the brand-new picture book *Pasta Pasta Lotsa Pasta*. While Aimee has barrelled through writing some of her books without any sort of an outline, “seeing in her head where to go,” she now describes herself as more of a “plotter” than a “pantser.” If she gets stuck, she relies on craft (like beat sheets from *Save the Cat*) to help her through. Aimee says that every book requires a different approach and often dictates what that approach will be. She suggests that writers trust the process and trust their own creative cravings.