

Susan Fletcher on Inspiration

1. How has reading served as inspiration for your writing?

Books I've read have inspired me on every level!

On the level of why-do-you-write-at-all, I don't think I'd even have wanted to write if I didn't love reading so much. I'm talking about reading as in living a story, stepping inside a book character's world and breathing along with him, falling in love with him, breaking my heart over him, busting out of the tight little time-and-place box I live in and experiencing stuff I'd never imagined. There's a kind of magic in making that happen. It's sorcery. And, ever since I first experienced it, I've wanted to perform that magic, too.

On the level of I-want-to-be-that-good, there are authors who inspire me to try to pull my writing skills up. I read their books and I say to myself, "Wow! I want to be that good." Not that it's going to happen. But reading these authors makes me want to be better than I am right now. It makes me reach for what they can do and I can't. Okay, I'm going to give you some names. Just a few. I can't include everybody. And I'm not even saying they're the best authors in the world—just that they speak to me in this particular way. Katherine Paterson. David Almond. Philip Pullman. Mary Doria Russell. Khaled Hosseini. Ellen Howard. Orson Scott Card. Susan Cooper. Rosemary Sutcliff. Charles Dickens. Eloise McGraw's historical novels. Mary Stuart's Arthurian novels. Kenneth Oppel's *Airborn* and *Skybreaker*. Laurence Yep's *Dragonwings*. And lots more. I am so just scratching the surface here.

On the level of wow-what-a-great-idea... Well, let me give you an example. One day, while I was researching *Shadow Spinner*, I stumbled on this tiny passage in a wonderful nonfiction book I was reading, *Tales of Two Cities*, by Abbas Milani. The passage told of a tradition in Persia that some people have the ability to have dreams for other people. So if you knew someone like that, you might pay him to have a dream for you. I marked the place, set down the book. I had goosebumps—I kid you not. This idea does nothing for some writers I've talked to, but it totally rang my chimes. I knew that I would write a book about it. And it wound up being *Alphabet of Dreams*.

2. You have a grown daughter. Has she been an inspiration for any of your books?

It's best, if you can arrange it, **not** to be born the child of a novelist. My poor daughter Kelly has had her life cannibalized and recycled into my books, in one way or another, all her life.

As a little kid:

If you look at the original cover of *Dragon's Milk*, the illustration looks pretty much exactly how Kelly used to look from the back, when she was a little kid—with that single, thick blonde braid. Coincidence? I think not. In my imagination, Kaeldra (*Dragon's Milk's* protagonist) was a medieval-fantasy version of the person I thought Kelly might grow up to be. Of course, Kelly has turned out totally different! She is emphatically **herself**—nothing at all like Kaeldra.

As a teenager:

In *Shadow Spinner*, I was just writing merrily along without really thinking about Kelly. Or so I thought. But it turned out that Marjan, my protagonist, was really ticked off at her mother for some stuff she'd done. At the same time, in real life, teenage Kelly was, well, seriously annoyed with me a lot of the time. To put it mildly. The thing is, even if

you're writing about something far, far away from your ordinary life—like, for instance, a Middle Eastern harem hundreds of years ago—the loves and worries and obsessions of your real life are going to seep into your book. Near the end of *Shadow Spinner*, Marjan realizes that her mother was human and, though Mom had made some mistakes, she'd done the best she knew how. Marjan forgives her mother. I honestly didn't realize until after I'd finished *Shadow Spinner* that I was writing about what I longed for in real life. (Except I wanted to be alive when it happened.)

As an adult:

Now I'm working on another dragon book...inspired partly by the microbiology work 28-year-old Kelly does in a scientific laboratory. I have to tell you, I never **got** science when I was going to school. I was allergic to it. But now, hearing Kelly talk about her work, I realize that science can be completely cool. On any given day in the lab, she might discover something that nobody else in the entire world knows. I get ridiculously excited about it. Who knew those scientists were having so much fun! Nowadays, we have long phone conversations in which Kelly teaches me about science, and then I go back to my computer and try to use what I've learned to make the world of my dragons come alive. That kid with the thick blond braid has turned out to be more amazing than I ever could have imagined.

3. What advice would you give to kids who are interested in becoming authors?

Aside from the usual things (read and write on your own, just for fun), cultivate the ability to notice and remember what interests you. It doesn't matter if nobody else finds it interesting. It doesn't matter if it seems totally bizarre, even to you, that you're interested in it. I sometimes like to imagine what Ray Bradbury's parents must have thought about his interest in circus sideshows when he was a kid.

Ray's mom: Ray, have you been down there hanging out with those circus freaks again?

Ray: But I like those guys. One of them did the coolest thing today—

Ray's dad: You keep that up, young man, and you'll never amount to anything!

Of course, what Bradbury picked up at circus sideshows was his **material**. It was part of what made him who he was, as a writer.

Still, it's amazing how easy it is to let that first flicker of interest flit past without catching it. Or worse yet, to dis it. Or accept other people's opinions when they dis it. It took me a really long time to learn that random things that interest me for no apparent reason are important to my writing life, no matter how weird they seem. So I need to catch them quick, before I forget. And then pursue them. Read about them. Talk to people who know about them. If possible, experience them.

Lighthouses, falconry, kids in harems, ancient camel caravans, caves, messenger pigeons, making pottery... They've all obsessed me, at one time or another. Randomly! And they've all wound up as inspiration for my books.

Just one more question, please?

Q: Have you ever done something scary to research your books?

A: I am a total chicken. Honestly. I have no desire to do anything that's remotely daring. However, sometimes, when writing a book, I realize that I'm unfortunately going to have to do something scary. At least, scary to me. Which is setting the bar pretty low.

For instance, when I was almost finished writing *Alphabet of Dreams*, I began to get worried about camels. I had done tons of research on camels, but it was all safe research, the kind I vastly prefer: Reading books about camels. Going to movies with camels in them. Taking brave, camel-riding people out to lunch and asking them camel questions.

So I hadn't actually ridden a camel, myself. And now this pesky little voice in my head started torturing me. "Yeah, you know a lot about camels," it said, "but what if you've missed something? What if you've got some obvious little camel-thing wrong, and all the camel people will know it, and they'll all sneer at you?"

I tried to make the voice shut up, but it wouldn't.

Did I mention that I knew a **lot** about camels?

So finally I gave up. I went online and found this camel ranch where I could take a half-day camel trek in the desert, and I called to reserve a spot.

"The road to the ranch is kind of tricky," the woman said.

"Tricky? What do you mean?"

"Well, it's just that there are some clearance issues."

"Clearance issues?"

"Yeah. In other words, better not rent a sports car or something low to the ground for driving here. There are a few potholes and such. Get an SUV."

And such. That worried me a little. So I rented a Ford Explorer.

When I cut off the highway for the road to the camel ranch, the road still looked like an actual road. Okay, not a paved road, but still a road.

Pretty soon, although the road still looked more or less like a road, it had narrowed to the width of the Explorer—plus or minus a few inches—and the left-hand shoulder of the road had vanished entirely, replaced by a steep, plunging chasm.

Guard rails? Surely you jest. There was nothing between me and—not to put too fine a point on it—The Yawning Abyss.

I thought I was gonna die.

Later, I found out that just the previous week someone had accidentally driven off the edge and had to be helicoptered to a hospital.

When I finally got past the chasm, the road stopped looking like a road altogether. It just looked like a hilly field full of wide, flat, tippy boulders. I had to guess whether this wide,

flat, tippy boulder or that wide, flat, tippy boulder was supposed to be the so-called “road.” And every time I drove up onto one of the boulders, I experienced one of those clearance issues the woman had mentioned: the bottom of the Explorer scraped, with a sickening, grinding sound, on the rock.

By the time I reached the camel ranch, I was laughing hysterically with relief to be alive. It was either that or cry, and frankly, crying is embarrassing.

Camel riding? Piece of cake. And I did learn one little camel-thing that I changed in the book. To be brief: The camel kneels down so you can climb onto its back. Then it rises to its feet, unfolding its legs in a complicated way: up to its back knees first, then all the way up in front to its feet, then all the way up in back to its feet. Before actually riding a camel, I thought you’d want to lean backward first, then forward, then backward again, to avoid being catapulted off the front or rear of the camel. But all you have to do is lean back the whole time. “Lean back!” the camel guide kept yelling at me. So that’s what happens in the book.

Susan Fletcher is the author of eight novels for young readers, including *The Dragon Chronicles* series (*Dragons’ Milk*, *Flight of the Dragon Kyn*, *Sign of the Dove*); *Alphabet of Dreams*, *Shadow Spinner*, and *Walk Across the Sea*. She has also written a picture book, *Dadblamed Union Army Cow*. Her books have received many awards and accolades, including two Oregon Book Awards (*Dragon’s Milk* and *Alphabet of Dreams*), the Oregon Spirit Award (*Alphabet of Dreams*), *School Library Journal’s* Best Books list, and the American Library Association’s Notable Books and Best Books for Young Adults lists. *Alphabet of Dreams* is on the Oregon Battle of the Books list for 2008-09. Susan has been doing school visits for the past twenty years. Susan will be the luncheon speaker for the ORA Annual Conference on Friday, February 6, 2009.