



A Club for Kids Who Love Books

# Louis Sachar on Writing

**The author talks about baby names, first drafts, and getting through writer's block.**

## **THE WRITING PROCESS**

**How do you prepare yourself for writing? How many hours do you spend writing, compared to what you spend thinking about it?**

Well, to me, the most important thing is my routine. I don't wait for new ideas or inspiration to come out of the sky. I sit down at my desk every day and I write for about an hour a day. That is when I'm doing the first draft of the book. I'm making up the story and trying to figure out who the characters are and what happens and how they get from place to place and chapter to chapter. With each subsequent draft — I normally do about five drafts of a book — I am able to write longer. I know the story better, and so the second draft, I might write an hour and a half. The third draft, I might write two hours a day, then maybe three or four hours a day for my fourth and fifth drafts.

**I understand your dogs don't let you write for too long.**

It used to be that after two hours they would say, "Okay, it's time for a walk." But now they have taught me to take them for a walk before I

even begin writing. When things are going well, when I am really excited about what I am writing, I usually think about what I am going to write while I am on the walk.

**So how much thinking do you do, compared to writing?**

It's hard to answer because I don't just sort of sit in a chair and think. When the story is going well and I am really into it, part of my mind is thinking about it all the time. And probably even when the story isn't even going very well, I'm sure part of my mind is thinking about it all the time, because I will often be stuck at a part and not quite know what I am going to write next and won't consciously think about it. But the next morning when I wake up and take the dogs for a walk and sit down to write, suddenly I have all these ideas, and I have to wonder where they came from. So clearly some part of my mind has been working on that problem.

**Do you write in the early morning or late afternoon?**

Early morning.

**How do you create the characters in your books, and how do you think up their names?**

Well, the books and the characters and stories and settings all develop together. I start with a small idea — a small piece of a character or setting. And as I write, all aspects of a story develop from there. Names are always a little difficult. Right before my daughter was born, my wife and I got a book called *10,000 Baby Names*, and I still look through that book when I look for names. The kids of Wayside School are all named

after kids in an elementary school where I worked while going to college. And then the nicknames in *Holes* were just fun names to think of.

**What process do you go through in arriving at a final draft?**

I usually begin a novel with just a little idea, perhaps no more than a character trait. That idea will lead to another until it snowballs into a full-blown story. Since I do not plan or outline beforehand, I normally don't know what's going to happen next. I go through several drafts. The first draft is very unorganized, often with ideas at the end that are inconsistent with those at the beginning. In the second draft, I organize it better because I now have a pretty firm grasp of who the characters are and what is going to happen to them. By the time I get to the last rewrite (which may be the fifth or sixth pass), I try to convince myself that the story is all true, and that I am simply telling it, not making it up. After numerous rough drafts, I send the final copy to the publisher, but that's still not the absolute final copy. I then work with an editor, and I may do some more rewrites. Somehow I've now written 18 books. I'm always amazed when I finish a book and realize, hey, this actually is what I set out to do.

**When you write, do you seek feedback and opinions from others?**

No. I never talk about a book until I'm finished writing it. And, I like to be alone when I write. It took me a year and a half to write *Holes*, and nobody knew anything about it, not even my wife or my daughter. I think that is helpful for writing, as well as for anything else that takes a lot of self-motivation. The more you talk about something, the less you tend to do it. By not permitting myself to talk about *Holes*, I was forced to write it. The story was growing inside me for a year and a half, and I had no

other way to let it out. I write mostly for myself. I can never imagine my readers. I just try to write books that I would enjoy reading. I figure if I like them, the kids will too.

## **STAYING MOTIVATED**

### **Do you ever get bored with your story while you are working on it?**

I imagine there are parts that are boring, especially during the first draft, where I am just trying to figure out what happens, when I'm taking the character through the daily process. I know he's going to do this today and then he's going to do that. And so I have to kind of put it all down. And then when I rewrite, I might decide to skip past a day and just go right to the good part. But that first draft, I'm kind of not quite sure when the good part is going to happen or what is going to turn out exciting, so I write a lot of mundane stuff that sometimes bores me.

### **What do you consider the good part?**

It's just what strikes me as interesting to read. The part that, when I rewrite it, I am going to center that section around. It's the focal point.

### **So it's not necessarily the action?**

No. It could be how the character is feeling. It tends to be action, but I don't think in those terms, I just think in terms of what's interesting to read, how I am going to get the character. I have a basic story of: This is going to happen in the story. But somehow you have to get from the beginning to the middle to the end to keep the reader interested without jumping to the end. So it's whatever those things are that keep it interesting.

### **Do you ever get writer's block?**

I get writer's block a lot. Usually I just try to get through it, to write anything, because I know I'm going to do four or five drafts of a book. So, maybe the next time I get to this point, I'll have a better idea of what to do. So, I just do anything just to get through it.

### **BEING AN AUTHOR**

#### **What is your favorite thing about writing?**

I think it's a tremendous feeling of accomplishment that I get from starting with nothing, and somehow creating a whole story and setting and characters.

#### **What's the worst part about writing?**

Most days, it just feels like I'm not accomplishing much. I write for about two hours a day, and most of it just seems like a waste of time. It amazes me how after a year, all those wasted days somehow add up to something. Another thing I don't like is that it's a very solitary profession. I think it would be nice sometimes to go to an office and see people every day, instead of just sitting in my room.

#### **After many years, does writing sometimes seem like just an ordinary job?**

It's not fun when I can't figure out what to write. Usually, when I finish the book, I look back and think it was fun to write, but while I'm writing it, it's not really fun at all.

### **Did you ever get discouraged when you were starting out?**

My first book, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*, was not distributed well when it first appeared in 1978. The book was difficult for parents and teachers to find. It never sold very many copies, but I got lots of fan letters, which greatly encouraged me. Still, even though I was uplifted by the attention, supporting myself as a writer still looked like a rough proposition at the time.

### **What advice would you give to kids who are interested in making a career in writing?**

Read. Find out what you like to read, and try to figure out what it is about it that makes you like it. And the best advice I can give is what they don't like hearing, and that is you need to rewrite. I understand; I used to hate rewriting when I was their age. But my first drafts are absolutely awful. I would be embarrassed to show them to anyone. It's not until I start really knowing the story, rewriting it to make it better, that it turns into something.