

# Interview Q&A with Kelley Kay Bowles

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## KELLEY ON BELLY . . .

What inspired you to write *Down in the Belly of the Whale*?

Several years ago, I travelled with my boyfriend (now he's my husband) so he could work the summer at a sports camp in the Berkshire Mountains. We stayed in this little cabin in the woods where I went running (okay, jogging, maybe speed walking) in the mornings and listening to my Walkman. I love eighties music, and one of my favorites is a collection called *Living in Oblivion*. There was a zippy little song on it called "Belly of the Whale" by Burning Sensation, which really struck me. It's based on the biblical story of Jonah, but the way I heard the song reminded me of most of our own adolescent stories—those feelings of isolation built in to our teenage years, no matter what groups we're in or what it looks like to others, that we share as a common condition. The story formed from there, so I'd go from exercise to sitting in that little cabin, forming Harper's basic story on my laptop.

Are any of the characters based on real people?

Not at all. And yes, of course. What I mean by that is that all of my characters have elements of me and people I know, but each character is a whole new imaginary (but real to me) person, the sum total of an idea I had and everything I learned before she or he was born. For example, Harper's hives—that's all me. A super mortifying bodily reaction to stress I have thankfully (mostly) grown out of.

Which character is most like you? Isabel? Harper?

I think Harper is most who I've been and Isabel is who I most want to be. I wish I was as cool as Cora is when I was in high school, although I hate what Cora had to go through to become who she is.

Did you do any background research for this book? What personal experiences informed your writing of this YA novel?

The main thing I had to research was the pretext call. I wasn't sure how Harper could get involved in Cora's case from a legal standpoint. A cool small town thing is that I directed the District Attorney in a play at my church, and he helped me clarify the legal questions. Thanks, Pete! Personally, I have MS, have had it for a long time and used that personal knowledge. I've also learned a lot about acupuncture as an alternative medicine for my MS, and that information, as you'll see, plays an important part in Harper's story.

## HOW KELLEY GOT HER START IN WRITING . . .

How long have you been writing?

I have loved writing since birth, practically. But I've only been writing to share since my first published short story—a horror story called "Wobegone" published in *Crimson* magazine in 2000. I've only been able to write full time since October of 2013.



When did you realize that you wanted to become a writer?

I am book obsessed—have been since I was three years old. It has always seemed like such a natural progression, from being obsessed with reading stories to wanting to dissect them and wanting to create some of my own. New obsession!

Is being an author all you dreamed of, or did it just happen?

I feel like my life all around just happened, just keeps happening, and YES it is all I ever dreamed of. I work hard to keep it happening, though. I mean, once it starts. If that even makes sense.

What inspired you to become a writer?

People always talk to me like this was some sort of a choice. I've always loved stories, have read obsessively since I was three, and because of this there are always stories in my head. The stories have to come out, somehow. It's crucial to my mental health. So I let the stories out, and then there's much less likelihood of a meltdown. Meltdowns bad, stories good.

No, seriously, when I read good writing it makes me want to make my own stories better. Other writers inspire me to write.

Who are your influences?

My biggest influence is most definitely my dad. He was this obsessive reader and adventurer who ended up opening the first-ever used bookstore (in the U.S. anyway. I think Europe has always had them). He traveled back and forth to that store—Salt Lake to Grand Junction and back—usually with his knees gripping the steering wheel and a book splayed across it, for years (true story), and he brought us any books we wanted. He also brought books HE liked, and shared those as well. My love for YA started with Madeline L'Engel (our books), and for mysteries started with cozies by Nancy Pickard, Jill Churchill, and Julie Smith (his books) and graduating to more hard-boiled fare by James Lee Burke and Harlan Coben (also his). He died in 2012, and I found out he, himself, had always wanted to write. I was heartbroken to hear of this unrealized dream. I hope I can do justice to those dreams, in memory and in honor of him.

What books have most inspired you, and who are some authors that have inspired your writing style?

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is a perfect book, in my opinion. But there are so many others—books inspire me because of the way the author turns a phrase, paints a picture or makes me hungry for the next moment. *East of Eden*. *Cat's Cradle*. *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

Harlan Coben is the one who inspired me to write a mystery—I wanted to write something where the reader laughed a lot and didn't know how the book would end. Dean Koontz has always inspired me because I think he's such a great storyteller. My friend Shawn told me once to read *TickTock* because the rapport between the two main characters sounded a lot like my voice as a writer. I read the book and was so flattered to have a comparison made like that! Stephen King is, also, in my mind a genius storyteller. *11-22-63* had so many moving parts to it and he made them all come together in this amazing machine. Plus I feel he's a romantic and a feminist and an optimist—all wrapped up in this word package that can scare the bejesus out of you.

When did you begin writing, and what was the very first thing you ever wrote?

I have always loved writing, the way words can be combined in so many ways to create so many feelings. Stories can go anywhere I want them to go. Unlike life, which is much harder to control. I've always liked messing around with words—stories for my Barbie dolls, captions for my yearbook—but I didn't really start working on fictional stories and poems until my college creative writing class. I wrote a sci-fi story while listening to "Unforgiven" by Metallica (betcha didn't know I was a Headbanger from way back), and my professor, Charles Clerc, thought it was good enough to enter it into an L. Ron Hubbard short story contest. I didn't win, but the process of letting the story in the song inspire me to write a totally unrelated story was intoxicating.



## KELLEY'S THOUGHTS ON THE WRITING PROCESS . . .

How do you come up with your stories, characters, character names, POV, etc.?

I people-watch and eavesdrop. A lot.

In *Death by Diploma*, Emma was my college roommate and current friend, and Leslie is one of my closest friends and colleagues from Colorado. The other names are just random ones I pulled out of my...hat.

The storylines can come from anywhere, I guess—news, television, myths. I taught high school English and drama for twenty years, including mythology—one of my favorite classes to teach. You can get a lot of ideas from mythologies and fairy tales, plus it's SO fun to tell those stories in the classroom.

POV is tough to decide. I experiment with it all the time—the *Chalkboard Outlines* series is third person attached, but the *Foundation* series (YA Paranormal) alters between first and third person. And the YA standalone *Down in the Belly of the Whale* is first person, present tense. I've never done second person—maybe that'll be next!

What do you think makes a good story?

Interesting characters with difficult decisions to make. I like it when I'm constantly asking "why did THAT happen?"; "who the heck is THAT?"; "why did that guy choose THAT path?"; etc. The questions are what keep me reading, and the people in the story make me care what's going to happen as a result of those questions.

What does it take for you to love a character?

I need to believe their actions are true to their belief system and history.

How do you utilize that when creating your characters?

I ask that question of myself whenever the character decides to do something.

What is your writing routine? Are there things you absolutely need to start writing?

I have a small "office"—AKA a chair—in the corner of my bedroom, complete with laptop and picture of my late father, bookseller extraordinaire. There is a schedule taped to the side of my dresser, laying out chunks of time for each writing project and each social media outlet. Seven days a week!

Do you work from an outline?

Ha. I WISH I were organized like that. No, I take whatever my basic story premise is, combine it with whichever characters I pick, and then we're off to the races. It goes where it wants to. I bought this pretty pink three-ring binder. With pockets. My intention was (is) to have a section and a pocket for each of my characters, with journal entries, magazine pictures, objects, anything that would contribute to my knowledge of the story. Isn't that a great idea? A mystery writer, Michele Scott, gave me that idea. It's still sitting on the shelf next to the computer—pretty, pink, and empty. I'm lucky if I can find pockets of time to do both marketing and writing, much less organizing my life that way.

Can you tell us a little about your writing philosophy?

I don't know that I have a philosophy, per se. I have a compulsion to write stories or observations which expand upon people and situations. I hope to find an audience who likes the stories, but I will continue writing them no matter what, because if I don't my head will explode.

What is your writing style? Outliner/planner or seat of the pants?

My writing style has most definitely been pantsier, but I'm in the middle of a book which is neither—instead it's about tapping in to the brain's evolutionary REQUIREMENT for story. It's called *Story Genius* by Lisa



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Cron and so far it's super interesting—I'm excited about implementing elements of this "blueprint" which is neither outlining nor pantsing, and I hope it helps me get better and better, which is always what I'm trying to do...

Can you tell us about your editing process?

I don't edit anything until the entire first draft is finished. Then I give the manuscript to several beta readers, compile all their comments and ideas, and then dive in to the editing.

Do you listen to music as you write?

I have this recording I picked up at a "Write Your Book in a Weekend" conference. It's sort of a beach-y, meditative type track with music and ocean sounds—also coyotes howling in the background. I know, right? Coyotes? But it puts me in a mind space that helps the words come out, for sure.

What do you find most challenging about the writing process, and how do you deal with it?

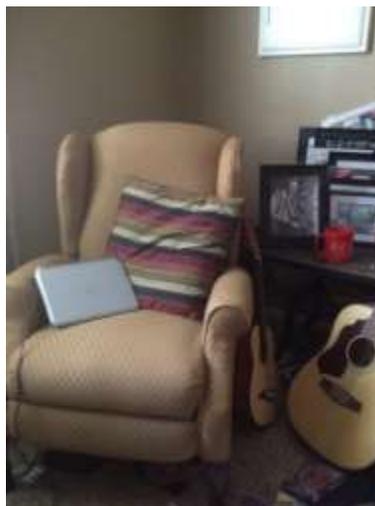
I am most challenged by the number of ideas I have in my head and on my plate, and the inability to find enough time to spend on them all. I don't deal very well with it, I think. I'm trying to just attack one thing at a time, because that's all anyone can really do, isn't it? I just wish I did it better.

I feel lucky that dealing with this constant challenge means I don't really suffer from writer's block. I have so many projects happening at any given time—right now I'm trying to finish a humorous self-help memoir (you're right. Not an actual genre. Yet.), I have to change the POV on one YA Paranormal, COMPLETELY overhaul a YA Paranormal that is first in a series, and I need to get started on *Chalkboard Outlines*® Book Two, which I am very excited about even though no one has yet read Book One, *Death by Diploma*. So you see? If I get blocked on whatever I'm working on, then BAM, I shift to a different project. It's nice that I have constant assignments for my magazine job also, because it's a completely different type of writing, as are my fiction and non-fiction projects. Allows for whatever state my brain is in!

One more challenge—I have MS, have had it since 1994. Two symptoms I have are crushing fatigue, and the pesky problem of my right hand not working so well after a certain amount of activity on the computer or on the paper. Same problem with my left leg (on the street, not on the computer). I deal with those by living my life as a champion napper (I have a scooter, too). At least once a day I have to stop everything and lie down for a while. I did this when I was teaching, too. It's awesome. I think everyone should do it.

When and where do you do your writing?

This is my office, AKA a chair and a laptop in the corner of my bedroom:



When I first started writing full time, I put a schedule on the wall, AKA the dresser sitting next to this chair, dividing my day between articles for the magazine (I write for eleven community magazines here in San Diego), sending queries or proposals for unpublished writing projects, Facebook, Twitter, GoodReads, LinkedIn, blogs, and oh, yes, WRITING. Every day holds a combination of all those things, which are bookmarked by taking my two young sons to and from school and their myriad activities. And trying to have a date with my husband, who is currently coaching three baseball teams. Someday.

It is an insane schedule, and I remember teaching full time being bonkers too (I taught English and drama for twenty years), but not like this. I love it, though! I'm living the dream.

What have you learned about promoting your books?

I am learning I can't do it all. I'm trying to find a way to put them and myself out there in a way that is still conducive to me having a writing schedule and a family. I haven't figured it out yet. I'm just going to do the best I can, in the hopes that my stories also speak for themselves and will make people want to read them.

What are you most proud of as a writer?

I feel like my writing isn't pretentious. And what I mean by that is that it reflects me, really. I am impulsive and honest and that means not very tactful. If I use big words, it's because I know them and they are the ones I chose to most accurately reflect what I'm trying to say, not because I want you to be impressed. Of course, it's fine if you want to be impressed, but that's not why I chose those words. 😊 I am idealistic and optimistic, and while this might never make me a creator of "literary" fiction, what you see is what you get. It comes from my heart and my self, and I am proud of that.

If someone wanted to become a writer, what tips would you give to them?

I would just tell them never to give up, and never stop learning and trying new things. Also, and I cannot emphasize this enough: YOU HAVE TO READ. A LOT. People who tell me they want to write but don't want to read are delusional and will never succeed. This is true, I believe, in any profession: the more you study and practice, the better you will get. The best musicians listen to all kinds of music and learn about the history of music, the best politicians study all types of governments and policies, and *et cetera, et cetera*. Hmph. I could rant about this for days. You also have to write, a lot, although I don't ascribe to all of the people who say you have to write every day or this many words a day or X number of hours or whatever. You should figure out your own schedule and make sure it includes study and practice. Oh, and you absolutely have to work on a thick skin. Like, tortoise shell thick. There are always people who have nothing better to do than knock you down, and it takes a long time and many rejections to find your success, but if you take the ones who offer constructive ideas and help and use them, and throw the non-helpful douchebag ideas away, it'll all help you get better.

### KELLEY'S FAVORITE AUTHORS AND BOOKS . . .

If you could have dinner with any writer, living or dead, who would it be and what would you talk about?

I love love love Stephen King, Dean Koontz and Harlan Coben, but I fully plan on having dinner with them at some point in my future, so I'll let you know what we talked about. As far as the writer whose brain I am dying to pick, that is of course William Shakespeare. I would ask him how on earth he can have such a vast knowledge of the human condition while living in such narrow and untraveled circumstances. I mean, can you imagine? Do you think he had dreams? Visions? Maybe he was a time traveler, and he could leave his modest house in England and travel anywhere and anywhen, then pop back home and create his masterpieces. But even that wouldn't explain his understanding—I mean, lots of people are well-educated and well-traveled, and still not self-aware or world-aware. Jeez.



If you could collaborate with any other author (living, dead, or undead) who would that be and why?

Of course it would be William Shakespeare, first off—in my opinion he knew more about people and what makes them tick than just about anyone else. I'd love to know how he knew. But I love so many other authors, and so I'll make a list: Stephen King, Harlan Coben, John Steinbeck, Ray Bradbury, Harper Lee, Barbara Kingsolver, Madeline L'Engle, A.A. Milne, and finally, of course, Dean Koontz (he lives like 75 miles away from me and I am always scheming to find a way to meet with him.)

If we lived in a Fahrenheit 451 culture, which book would you want to memorize?

OMG that is such a great question. I think a Shakespeare play would be the easiest to memorize because I taught it for so many years, and like I said, he's a genius who knows people. But maybe *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *A Wrinkle in Time*.

### **KELLEY ON BEING A TEACHER . . .**

How long did you teach English?

My first teaching job was in South Lake Tahoe, California from 1992-1994. Then I had that awful MS diagnosis in 1994, so I moved back home. I then taught English and drama at my old high school (!) from 1994 until we moved to California in 2011. So...nineteen years? The *Chalkboard Outlines*® cozy mystery series was written in a fictional Colorado mountain town called Pinewood, which is a combination of both schools and towns in which I've taught.

Being a teacher is probably its own special kind of torture. What's the worst thing that's happened to you as a teacher?

My first year, I taught Summer School. I was twenty-two years old, nowhere near the pillar of strength and intimidation you see before you now. I had to leave the class for a minute to make some copies, and I returned to find one guy trying to light another guy's T-shirt on fire.

That was the last year I taught Summer School.

After about five or six years of intense Trial by Fire in a more figurative sense, I'd morphed into someone I KNOW students would (did) think twice before pulling shenanigans like that.

What did you learn about writing from all those years of grading high school essays?

I think more than what I learned about *writing* from all my years of grading essays is what I learned about *people* from those years in the classroom. Teaching is a study in human dynamics, and teaching English even more so—because analyzing literature helps students recognize themselves and think about their place in the community and the world at large.

My almost-twenty years of teaching gave me countless experiences to draw from in my future fifty or more years as a writer, and I'm ridiculously grateful for those, too.

What has been your biggest adjustment going from teaching to writing?

Going from teaching to writing has been an unbelievable adjustment in a couple of ways, both wonderful and difficult ways. I didn't get to write too much when I first moved to San Diego, but that's because I was gifted with this amazing opportunity to be a stay-at-home mom for a few years here, which I NEVER thought would happen in a two-teacher family. My sons were going on three and five when we arrived, and while my oldest got to start in a transitional half-day kindergarten right away, my youngest and I got to explore San Diego. We went to the library and local parks and activities, and I am immeasurably grateful. But what I noticed then, and continue to adjust to now that I'm at home writing while the boys are at school, is how difficult it is to not interact with other adults in a meaningful way. I took adult conversations for granted, for sure, even conversations with my teenaged students had a different ambience than time with a three-year-old, or now,



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time with just me. Well. I do converse with myself, but my answers are never as interesting as the ones I hear from others. My schedule is really busy, but I still plan a once-a-month coffee and a once-a-month lunch date with two of my friends here, just to keep myself sane.

And on that note, here's the second biggest adjustment—scheduling. As a teacher, my life was laid out for me minute-by-minute and keeping my organization productive was tricky, but a writing schedule is tricky in a whole 'nother way. I have all these stories in my head, and I know I have to work on marketing and spotlighting and looking for reviews and all of the minutiae which is mostly the responsibility of the writer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and still I want to have huge chunks of time devoted to the writing itself. It's easy to get sucked down the rabbit hole of social media, even though I'm doing it for the purpose of my job. I have a schedule on the wall of my "office" AKA a chair in the corner of my bedroom, laying out sections of time every day to write articles (I work for a local community magazine here in San Diego), check Twitter, Facebook, GoodReads, LinkedIn, post on all of those sites and interact with people on all of those sites, and write a blog for my website. I also interact with other authors from my publishing house, RedAdept Publishing, and they provide a lot of knowledge and support. Which is great, because I'm so new to this and I really know nothing.

Then, of course, the rest of the day (well, until 3:00 when I pick up the boys) I am working on a novel or nonfiction project. Right now I'm trying to finish the fourth draft of a nonfiction self-help memoir (yes, you're right, a nonexistent genre. For now.) called *The A or B Principle*. I need an agent for that one. For mystery book #2, *Poison by Punctuation*, I'm heavy into content edits and then I need to start working on book #3 of the *Chalkboard Outlines* series. My YA Paranormal *Down in the Belly of the Whale* has just entered an intense marketing phase and I have to COMPLETELY overhaul the first story in a Paranormal YA series. I get to apply the knowledge I've gained from having editors for *Death by Diploma* and *Down in the Belly of the Whale* to existing books I've written and books I'm writing now. I have a lot of stuff to do! So it's amazing to be able to schedule myself in whatever way I want, but also overwhelming to have so much to do and only myself to make it happen. Maybe someone in my house should start handing out detention.

### KELLEY ON LIFE AWAY FROM THE LAPTOP . . .

Are you originally from Southern California?

I was born in Salt Lake City, Utah (and in answer to your next question, no, I am not), but raised in a Western Colorado town called Grand Junction. Because I have MS and my body responds poorly to extremes in temperature (GJ gets really hot AND really cold), we moved to San Diego, The Finest City in America (it's really called that!) and very temperate, in 2011.

What do you do with your time when you aren't writing?

I read, whenever it is humanly possible—before bed, at the beach, in the car. When someone else is driving. Unlike my dad who spent the 1970s and eighties driving back and forth from his bookstore in Salt Lake City to our home in Grand Junction: he would drive with his knees and read his book splayed out on the steering wheel the whole way!

I love watching plays and concerts when I can—San Diego has an amazing Old Globe Theater for anything Shakespeare (TOTALLY pertinent to my cozy mystery series) and my husband and I went to Metallica in August (which is a band I think Shakespeare woulda loved, by the way. Metallica and Frank Sinatra). I volunteer at the boys' elementary school, and for our local Friends of the Library, and I do a hotline for four hours a week. A helpline, I guess it's more appropriate to call it a helpline: It's called MS Friends. I have MS, was diagnosed in 1994, and this line is staffed by people with MS, and people with MS or who have questions about MS are the ones who call in. I've always been involved with the National MS Society, but because I now have more limitations on my ability to travel and work, the Friends line is the perfect opportunity to stay involved. I feel like I am contributing, especially when someone calls who is newly diagnosed or having a terrible exacerbation.



Because I've been living with MS for so long, it feels great when my experience and optimism help someone who's scared or sad.

You've said your life revolves around baseball. What are some baseball-related things you've done recently?

Haha, it's so weird to think about that! I am the epitome of the non-sports person—I didn't play sports, I'm not that competitive, at the end of the day I'd rather read a book. Then I went and married me a baseball player and had two sons! He (my husband) coaches all their teams plus he's a coach at the high school, so I don't see him much from January-May, and when I do, SOMEONE'S playing baseball! Now they're old enough to do All-Stars and club ball, so it's literally all baseball all the time. I know a lot about baseball now—more than I ever planned to. I appreciate it more than I used to; it is intricate and strategic. I love watching the boys play, which is good because like I said—it never stops. I still don't watch it on TV, although because I'm married to the ultimate fan(atic), I've had the privilege of seeing the Padres, Angels, Dodgers, Yankees, Red Sox, Cardinals, Diamondbacks, Rangers, Giants, A's, Rockies and Mariners play live in their stadiums in the course of our fifteen years together! Live sports, like live music or live theater, is way more interesting than anything on a screen, in my opinion. Thank goodness.

Have you ever purchased something from a late-night infomercial? If so, what?

Ugh. I have a schedule that starts at either 4:40 a.m., 6 a.m. or 6:45 a.m., depending on the day of the week. So I don't really do anything late at night 😊 but of course I've gotten sucked into the infomercial world at other times of day, usually for beauty products that I hope will make me look younger. Ha.

Favorite writing food or snack?

Anything made of chocolate or anything I consider to be in the same family, i.e. caramel, vanilla, cheesecake. Yum yum yum sugar sugar sugar. Just what we all need, right?

Coke, Pepsi, or?

I like Coke, but if Dr. Pepper is an option, I'll take that every time. I'm a Pepper, he's a Pepper, she's a Pepper—wouldn't ya like to be a Pepper too? No? Well, that's okay—more for me!

Most importantly, are you a cat or a dog person?

I love 'em all! I'm just a creature person, I think—starting with guinea pigs when I was little. My adult life I've always had big girl dogs—labs and golden retrievers (Shaquille O'Neal, Goo, Ellie and Skye)—and in Colorado I also had two boy black cats—Echo and Chinook. (Temperamentally, I prefer girl dogs and boy cats). Echo and Chinook, unfortunately, sensed when we were getting ready to move to California and took off. Ellie, our golden retriever, died this past February at fourteen-and-a-half, AKA ninety-eight people-years old. Though we fully had no plans to get another pet any time soon, two weeks later this little bedraggled wet dog found us and told us her name was Lucy. (The boys don't believe she told me that.) Lucy is a ten-pound mutt rescue dog—we think part Shi-tzu and maybe dachshund? Her body is long and she has hair, not fur, which was a requirement for our someday-not-today-future dog, so she adopted us. She thinks she is a Rottweiler, which almost got her head literally bitten off a few weeks ago when she tried to start a rumble with a pit bull. She is a cute little pistol, and we are really working on curbing that yappy bark little dogs have when they're asserting their alleged alpha status, because by all other standards she is a really good girl!



## FROM KELLEY TO HER READERS . . .

What's one thing people should know and/or don't know about you?

I rehearse what I'm going to say in my head before I say it. A lot.

Are there other things you'd like readers to know about you (personal challenges you've faced that influenced you, funny stories about the writing or research, etc.)?

I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 1994. I've now been dealing with that disease almost half my life, and it has both challenged and uplifted me, as chronic illness often does. My first doors to publication were opened due to the disease, when I was a local speaker at an MS Luncheon which was keynoted by Jackie Waldman. She wrote an inspirational series called *The Courage to Give*, so she asked me to write a story then featured in *Teachers With the Courage to Give*. This publication led me to be featured in three other non-fiction pieces, including a Simon and Schuster series by Kay Allenbaugh called *Chocolate for a Woman's Soul*. I feel dealing with this illness has made me a better person and consequently a better writer. I was raised in a seriously functional family, with parents who had emotionally (if not financially) spoiled daughters, AKA me. We didn't lose family members, no one had a drug problem, people said "I love you." I don't know if I had much compassion or empathy, though, with all this hunkydoriness. All the aforementioned reading also sparked my imagination plus a genetic tendency toward being a worrywart, and I felt all the good fortune couldn't last. I wasted a lot of time waiting for the other shoe to drop. When it did, in the form of a terrifying and unpredictable disease which didn't kill me—and yes I'm going there—made me stronger, some of those missing ingredients fell into place. I think I am much more dialed in to this world than I was before I was diagnosed, and the increased information and perspective has made me (is making me) a better writer and human.

If you ever have questions about MS, the MS Friends Helpline is open 9 a.m. to midnight EST every day: 800-344-4267

What do you hope readers take away most from your writing?

Hmm. What an interesting question. I hope they leave my writing feeling entertained and satisfied of course. But also I just want them to have a feeling about it. An emotion that comes to the forefront when you finish a story of mine. I'd love it if they left with a new idea or answer to a question.

What have you learned in creating your books?

I've learned that I want to do this forever.



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