

I've been asked a copious amount of questions in the past twelve months. I've been asked what I think of boys not reading. I've been asked about the importance of audience when I'm working on a novel and what people should be writing for the next generation. I've been asked if I've read *the Twilight Series* and the *Eragon Series* and if I've said no, I've been asked, why not? I've spoken alongside people who are focused on marketing and setting up surveys to find out what their audience wants from them. I've been asked why the young adult novel is issue based and obsessed with identity. What I think about the ETA's stance of Australian content in the classroom. Am I going to write an adult novel? What my process is now that I write full time? I get asked, now that I write full time, how does it feel not to be working any more? And I get asked, 'Why Fantasy, when it's not your genre?'

I've been asked so many questions, more than those who write for adults in this country and that's because I write for, and about, young people and for the little amount of media space YA and children's writers are given, it's amazing how many questions and how many theories are thrown around about what we should know, what we should be doing and what we shouldn't have done.

So this is a ten minute mishmash of my response.

Mostly, when I write, I try to block out all those questions because if I don't, I'll feel as if I have a duty. I block out most things except for the character and the story he/she wants me to tell. I block out words such as genre and audience. I especially try very hard to leave *Looking for Alibrandi* behind when I'm writing and at times I've wished my readers would too, when faced with the next Marchetta novel. But then again, I have to accept that they wouldn't be reading the next Marchetta novel if it wasn't for *Alibrandi*.

Back then in 1992, and some of you may have been witness to me saying this, I didn't know what I was doing. At the time I was quoted in the SMH as saying, "Nothing was going on in the writer's head" and I remember that quote, because it became a joke amongst friends for years. I'd love to think that in sixteen years I've learnt a thing or two about my process and what I expect from myself and where I'm going as a writer and this is what I've come up with -

That when a YA writer grows up, they don't write an adult novel unless an adult character comes calling.

That I will never write a story that ends without hope.

That I will always prefer my books being read by a whole lot of people, young, old and in-between, who love what I do with character and plot and dialogue rather than those who can tick the box of covering multicultural content in their newspaper or syllabus.

Mostly, that I will never try to compete with a trend.

At the Adelaide festival this year I spoke about shelf life and I'd like to think it's what a novel has when it's not researched like the latest fad. Sometimes I'm afraid that's what people think writing for young adults and children is all about. That as writers, we scout the market, like advertising executives, and work out what novels are getting the most sales or what genre seems to be the most popular. Do we need more books about vampires because it seems to be working for Stephanie Meyer? Do we need more books about Wizards because, according to most media, there has to be the next Harry Potter out there? As if a void must be filled.

Let me stress there is nothing wrong with wanting to write the next vampire novel. There's nothing wrong with wanting to do any of the above -if you have a passion or strong interest in it. It's not merely my rule, but my understanding of young people. I wish I could say they can spot a fraud from a mile away, because at times they can't. But they do begin working out the difference between a fad and the real thing. The real thing has shelf life.

Readers, at any age don't necessarily want your writing to come from a personal experience, but they want it to come from a place a whole lot more real than a survey in a magazine or a marketing meeting. A good writer doesn't check out the YA or children's aisle at the back of the bookshop to suss out how they can capture a niche in the market.

What they do is they write what infuriates and delights them, what they have a passion for, what touches them, what triggers off the warning bells of excitement when they hear the first strand of a character's voice in their head – the one that just won't go away. I was guilty in the classroom of forgetting to tell my students - that's what a writer *first* sets out to do rather than starting with the themes and issues. Sometimes, as adults and educators, we feel the need to categories. I remember a friend, who's a teacher, telling me he loved the social realism of the last hundred pages of *Jellicoe* when Taylor and Jonah travel to a very real Sydney as opposed to living in a very unreal or surreal Jellicoe. He didn't know what genre to place the first half. It was a dilemma for him. In *The Age* on the weekend the question was asked, *Is every young adult novel about identity* and in October at

the State Library in Melbourne, Randa Abdel Fattah, John Heffernan and myself were asked the same question by a teacher and I pointed out that it's us adults and teachers who identify novels by themes and issues, while kids are just getting lost in the story and I know we don't have enough time to do that in the classroom, but I wish I had let my students get lost for a lot longer.

When I told people that my next novel was a fantasy, many times I got this reaction. "Great, they're making a lot of fantasy novels into films these days" or "It's a very popular genre. It was smart of you to go that way."

I'd like to be considered smart for a lot better reasons than understanding a market and I'd like to think that there's more of a reason to go into a completely different direction than following a trend. But I know I'm going to have to justify my reason over and over again and I'll want to say each time, just read it and disregard where it fits. When I was asked to give a written response to a US publisher to the question "Why have you written fantasy" **I remember thinking, Is this a trick question? Will my response contribute to it being published? What should I be saying? And then I did what I always do when I write. I stopped thinking so much about audience and genre and just wrote what I felt was the truth for me.**

And part of my response was this.

"That story comes first and genre second so the reason I wrote *Finnikin of the Rock* as a fantasy was because my tale of a group of exiles wanting to reclaim their homeland couldn't be written in the here and now. Not because it would be too political, but because I didn't want fact to get in the way. I've been told often this year that to write fantasy I have to read the great fantasy writers first and know the conventions well, but I think the first step to writing good fantasy is not letting a cannon and rules get in the way. For me, it's about knowing this world we live in well. Where there has been a loss of faith, a displacement of spirit and a breakdown of community. In a way, that's what *Finnikin of the Rock* is about. Much the same as *Francesca* and *Jellicoe*.

More importantly, I really wanted to look at what happens when one loses their homeland. Loss of homeland, eventually leads to losing language and then identity. For me, *Finnikin of the Rock*, is a search for identity in the same way my other novels are. It's what happens when you're the granddaughter of immigrants and you loved your grandfather to death but couldn't communicate with him because he didn't speak English and you didn't speak his language. Loss of language is the first step to displacement.

(Read from p)

Whether it was an intention to explore loss of identity, I'm not sure. But it seemed to be part of the story these two young people brought to me because it was still part of mine. But I did know that I wanted to write a story of great love between two young people who drive each other crazy with their frustrations and expectations, I wanted to explore the love and misunderstanding between fathers and sons and men and women and I wanted it to end with a song of hope."

Most times I write what I know - a character comes calling who makes me want to shake them with frustration and hug them at the same time and then I take something away from them and watch them try to work out who they are without it. I write the story that I've always wanted to write, not the one, I'd like to write for all the wrong reasons. Usually it revolve around the universal themes that touch my life and believe me, in a day's teaching I would experience many of them: love, hate, identity, honour, courage, betrayal, hope, rebellion, freedom, misunderstanding, guilt, revenge - sometimes all before recess.

I received an email three days ago that helped put things in perspective for me. There was no dear Melina or Dear Ms Marchetta. It begins Hey, **No idea if you give a shit, but I just cried about fifty times while finishing On the Jellicoe Road....**

This is what I'd want to write back. That she's just become part of the world around me that I write about. I'll tell her that she's turned me into a thief because I'm stealing her voice for a character I'm writing. Because I loved its tone and its passion and its anger.

I'll tell her that sometimes I need to be told what it is that I do during the day while other people go to work to a place that has structure and purpose. Sometimes when you write, you have to create your own structure and purpose and you lose a bit of faith in yourself and what it is that you do.

And I'll thank her for not asking me a question, but letting me believe in some way, that I provided her with some kind of answer.

Thank you