

Lois Ruby is a full-time author of young adult books. She lives in Wichita with her husband and has three grown sons. She was interviewed at her home on February 25, 1997.

Linda

To get acquainted with you, I'd like to begin today with some background information about your growing up years, your early career, and what led you to Kansas.

Lois

I grew up in San Francisco with no brothers and sisters. When I was three, my father died, and shortly afterwards my mother and I lived in New York and the Dominican Republic.

My husband, Tom Ruby, and I met at Cal/Berkeley when we were still in our teens. We graduated and moved to Texas. I was the Young Adult librarian for the Dallas Public Library, which is how I got interested in books for teenagers. Twenty years ago my first book was published, but I've actually been writing as long as I've been reading.

When our boys were pre-schoolers, we came to Kansas for Tom's first job after his Ph.D. He's a clinical psychologist in private practice here in Wichita, and a really sweet guy. Our more worldly relatives say nothing ever happens in Kansas, but this state has a fascinating history and endless areas to explore in writing.

Linda

Who are the people who have had influence in your development as a writer - from childhood until now?

Lois

There were few books in my house other than the ones I brought home from the library. Librarians in those days were ogres. Still, I have my neighborhood librarian to thank for the fact that I started reading adult novels from age nine, rather than risk tiptoeing past her to the children's room. So I was exposed to good writing way before I knew about quality books for children.

Creative writing was considered a waste of time when I was in school, yet somehow I yearned to write stories - and did - for my own pleasure and to entertain my friends. My senior English comp teacher in high school taught us how to hone the perfect five paragraph essay through daily grinding practice, which we all hated. Looking back, I realize I've adapted her method to every length and type of writing, including fiction outlines. Thanks, Miss Garrett! I took one ten-week creative writing class at WSU [Wichita State University] from Ben Santos, a remarkable Philippine writer and superb teacher. My husband is my idea man and sounding board and gentle editor. Otherwise, the greatest influence comes from my writers' critique group. They don't let me get away with lazy writing.

Linda

Describe your writing process.

Lois

I have a little room in my house where I do all my work. I am surrounded by books and papers - 800 books, stacks of papers on the floor, and index cards. All different kinds of things that give me the security of knowing that if I need quick research on something, the answer is there or the clues are there as to where I need to go next.

I have a Macintosh computer, but I write everything by hand on the back of used paper. That way if I really flub it up, it's easy to just throw it away, and I don't feel like it's been such a waste. I get a scene done to the best of my ability for the first draft, then I type it into the computer. I need that visceral feeling of the pen scratching across the paper. I like to be able to go through something and just scratch it out and then see it after it's scratched out. If you write another sentence and you realize the first was actually better, you still have it right there.

I edit by hand, put the revisions into the computer, and keep doing that and doing that. I will try to hone a chapter thoroughly before I go on to the next chapter. I keep plodding along to the end and then quite often I'll be surprised by the ending. The things I planted in the story no longer directly lead to the ending. Then I have to go back and make some changes, make sure all the clues I need are placed in there and that there are no false leads.

Usually what happens is a pretty automatic, magical thing that I can't explain. But somehow the way the human mind works, we do lead to inevitable conclusions, and if we're lucky we have planted things along the way that will get us there. I never know how the story is going to end. I like to be surprised, just like the reader likes to be surprised. Then I have to make sure that I got there through some kind of logic.

I have a lot of note cards I arrange by subject so if I am doing research on a particular theme or idea or historical period, I have everything in little stacks. For example, on the book *Skin Deep*, I don't have a natural understanding of the music of white supremacist teenagers. But I had someone who taught me about the music, and I had a contraband tape and transcriptions of some of the lyrics, so I have a whole section of cards an inch thick about the music. When I had to write a scene that involved a skinhead concert, for example, I took out my whole little stack of notes. I read through them until I could feel like I was placed in the scene.

In *Miriam's Well* I needed a lot of medical detail as well as religious detail, so all that is arranged by subject. Even though it's fiction, I feel that fiction has to be as accurate as you can make it, because a lot of kids will get their information from fiction and will not pick up nonfiction on a subject. Somebody who writes for kids has a responsibility to make sure that anything factual in the book is as accurate as you can get it for that time.

Linda

Do you spend a set period of time writing each day?

Lois

The ideal time for me to write is 5:30 in the morning until about 8:00. That's the time my mind is most

alert. If I am deeply into a project, close to the middle and moving to the end, I could easily work 16-17 hours a day and be totally lost in it and have a wonderful time. Unfortunately, other things intrude. My kids are grown, so I don't have those kinds of interruptions, but during February, March, and April I do a great deal of traveling to make school visits, so I can't do any writing while I am traveling like that. Which is not to say that I can't write anywhere besides in my little room, because I have written lots of chapters sitting in the orthodontist's office - I had three teenagers at one time, so we spent a lot of time there - or stranded at an airport. All I have to do is find a little quiet corner. I can have people all around me and noise going on, and that doesn't bother me as long as they are not requiring a response from me.

Linda

Except for those bursts of writing when you could go all day or half the night, would you say about half a day is a pretty good chunk of time and then you need to go do something else?

Lois

I would say three or four hours and then go do something to get back in touch with the real world. Then maybe a couple of hours later in the day.

Linda

. . . the thing I noticed in your books is the character development. Those characters seemed so different from each other and yet so real. The characters are what make the story go more than a plot line that you figured out . . . Do you see it that way?

Lois

Yes! Well, I am delighted to know that that is what comes across because that's exactly the way it works for me. Every story starts with a character, not a plot or an idea or problem or place or time. I always start with a character who takes over my mind, follows me around and taps me on the shoulder and says, "Ask me the questions. If you ask me the right ones, I can maybe have a story for you." I just have to figure out what the questions are.

I have about 40 or 50 questions on my computer. If they net some interesting answers, then I will pursue that character further. If I just find that it's a dead end, then that character has to go, and I wait for another one to come. But once I start asking the questions - I start with the demographic information then get deeper into the emotional geography of the character - then I know what the conflicts are. If the conflicts are interesting enough, then I can see where the plot might be heading.

At that point I have to stop and do the research to fit it into a time and place and get all the technological detail or whatever I need to flesh out that story. The characters are operating in one part of my mind; it feels like an animal waiting there to pounce! So the characters are sitting there saying, "let's get this thing going." But then the librarian half of me is saying, "wait a minute, you can't tell your story until I know what the details are that you have to fit your life into. If you're a character living in 1856, you can't tell me about that time until I know something about that historical period, and I know how you dressed and what you ate and what the political, historical, and geographical realities were at the time. Then, when I have all that head work done, you can tell me the story, and it will start to make sense to me."

So, it's like a constant battle between these two things going on in my head. I guess it's the librarian and the author parts trying to figure out who's going to be dominant here. That's the way it has worked in every book - except for one.

Skin Deep was a book I was asked to write, which made it very difficult because I did all the research on this painful subject before I had the character. It was only after a great deal of research that the character of Dan came to me, a boy not unlike my own son, whom I could care about and understand how he might be drawn into this kind of a movement [skinhead]. Then the underpinning of all the research came together with the character, and the story did begin to write itself.

Linda

It was almost as if events took him there rather than him making the decision that he wanted to live this lifestyle. It was almost like he was never really a part of that skinhead movement.

Lois

I never saw him as a very strong person. He was swept along. He lived with these women who were running his life. Then he had a girlfriend, and he abdicated some responsibility to her. Then this movement came along, and he was easily drawn into it. So I didn't see him as a person who was ready to take a stand on anything, until he reached the point where he really needed to get out of it. I don't think you only have to write about strong, upright characters. Books for kids have all kinds of different role models, and some kids do just drift until either the right thing or the wrong thing comes along for them.

Linda

In Miriam's Well, I kept trying to figure out what would happen in the end. I don't know whether you deliberately are foreshadowing, or the readers are just anticipating. But you think one of two or three things will happen: they're going to come and save her, or there is going to be a miracle cure, or she is somehow going to extricate herself from this religious belief. But in the end when you see that she stays with the family and the religion, you understand again that the character is driving that. . . . Because of her character you couldn't have the miracle cure, or you couldn't have the change in belief and have her still be her own character.

Lois

I think you're right. I am not interested in neat endings, and I'm not interested in miracles or fantasy. What I am interested in is the day-to-day miracle of just surviving and making choices that lead you somewhere. I think in books for kids, for teenagers in particular, the whole thing is about choices, options. So, none of my stories have neat, tidy endings, and this is the biggest criticism I get from teenage readers.

Linda

They can't stand that, can they?

Lois

They're very unsatisfied with that. I refuse to accede to their request that I tie things up neatly, because . . . if a kid reads a book and slams it shut and never thinks about it again, then the writer has failed that

reader. But if the kid has to stop and think - what happened? what are the possibilities? - as if those characters had lives beyond the printed page, then the writer has done a service, has achieved something other than just an interesting story. Very little that happens in our kids' lives causes them to think. How do they get through life without learning to reason things out and come to their own conclusions? So what I want to do in my books is provide characters who are not unlike them, just ordinary kids in extraordinary situations, who have lots of different choices. Some choose well and some don't. Sometimes the choices are so ambivalent that you don't know what you're choosing. The idea is for kids to look at these characters and think there are lots of options, there is always a way out, no matter how grim life may be at a given moment. It may not come out just the way you always wanted, but there are always choices beyond that choice, as well.

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Linda

Why did Skin Deep need to be set in Colorado?

Lois

I exported Skin Deep from Kansas very deliberately. My husband was apprehensive about my writing on this subject, afraid that it was dangerous. And I didn't want skinheads coming to my house and burning crosses on my lawn. My youngest son was in college in Boulder, Colorado, and it was the perfect place to set the story because it's a bizarre enough town that every kind of movement, from the most radical to the most conservative, happens right there in this little college town. Besides that, it's a beautiful place. The four years that my son was there we visited him often, and he did a lot of foot work for me. In fact, the book is dedicated to him because he was inestimable help in understanding this whole youth culture thing that was so alien to me, and in getting a real sense of place in Boulder.

Linda

Since we're talking about Skin Deep, let's go into the banned-book question. Is that your only book that has been banned?

Lois

Has it been banned?

Linda

I thought you said it had.

Lois

Well, no. It would be great if it would, because it would sell like crazy. Not one person has challenged Skin Deep that I know of, which surprises me because it has violence and vulgar language in it. I've had librarians and teachers say, "I like the book but I am not going to put it in the middle school." I understand and support that completely. [some middle schools do have it.]

However, I had . . . an incident over Miriam's Well. There's a section in the book that says some pretty scathing things about the Mormon church. I got a letter from a professor at Brigham Young University

who teaches children's literature. He said, "I think that this is an excellent book, but I cannot recommend it to my students because of the defamatory things you said about the Latter Day Saints." Well, I flipped to that page of the book and was horrified, until I realized that the character who was saying these things about the Mormon church had already been established as an unreliable person. He was crude, he was dumb, and so I thought it was clear that anything that issued from his mouth was not the gospel. I wrote back to this professor, asking him to look at the context of this passage and see whose mouth these words are in. I said, "I trust teenagers to be discriminating readers, to know whatever this boy says is not what they are to take as true, that obviously this boy doesn't know what he's talking about." You know, this professor wrote me back and apologized! He said he would recommend the book to his students.

. . . I expect something to erupt from *Skin Deep*. Of course, if librarians just choose not to put it in the library, that saves potential problems.

Linda

How do you feel about that?

Lois

I don't think you have time to hear how I feel about that! I'm a very liberal-thinking person; I believe in total access to information for everybody, including teenagers. But I also realize that parents have a right to determine what is appropriate for their children. They don't have the right to determine what is appropriate for other people's children. So, I think libraries should have everything available.

Linda

What about age, though, with some of the teenage type books?

Lois

Well, here's the thing. The difference between a sixth grader and an eighth grader is enormous in terms of maturity and experience. So unfortunately in those schools that have sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, you are going to have a wide range of suitable material. Just because it's not appropriate for a sixth grader does not mean that it should not be accessible to an eighth grader. I know it's a problem for the teachers on the front line. If the material is more appropriate to high school, it should be available there, but we also know that high schoolers don't read young adult books nearly as much as junior high and middle school people do . . . There are some sixth graders who are very mature. As a librarian, I wouldn't give *Skin Deep* to a sixth grader. I would question giving it to a seventh grader, but I would give it to an eighth grader without trepidation. But I'm not on the front lines; I don't deal with the battles with parents and administrators. I understand that they have to take some precautions to save their own hide. But I also understand that librarians have a responsibility to make things available to people who need the information.

Linda

Do you have something about ready to come out?

Lois

I have five books that are done, not one of which has been accepted for publication yet. It's a very mysterious and lengthy process. I have no idea what I need to do to get something published; it's hit-and-miss every time.

Linda

Do you believe in multiple submissions, or are you very straight-laced about one publisher at a time looking at a book?

Lois

I suffer from too much ethical conscience! The idea is that you are not supposed to submit to more than one publisher at a time. Publishers will keep things for a year, and you won't get an answer. It's really not fair, but at the same time, it's the way it's done now. I think it's going to have to be changed.

Linda

I read something about that. If you say you're doing multiple submissions, or you're not waiting any longer before you send it to someone else, it is the death knell for that book.

Lois

That's right, because their biggest fear is that somebody else is going to want it the same time they want it, which means you're going to have to pay more for it if there is a bidding war. So I sweat it out for months. If they haven't rejected it outright and it's been read by a couple of editors, you have a slightly better chance than starting cold with another publisher. It's a very frustrating process. Of all the things about the writing career, that is definitely the most distressing thing and one that would drive me out of it.

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Linda

Is there anything about your writing or about your books that you would like this audience of classroom teachers, reading teachers, and librarians to know?

Lois

A couple of things. One is I would want classroom teachers and librarians to be willing to take the risk, to have materials available to kids who need them. This isn't to say that they have to hand a book that may be problematic to a kid, but if that book is available in the classroom, then that student could pick it up. I think that's a very brave thing for the teacher to do. Kids get a lot of their factual information from novels. They don't all have the benefit of parents who will explain things to them that they need to know, particularly on controversial subjects - sex, birth control, and drugs - so a lot of what they pick up will come from books. I appreciate teachers who have that kind of courage, and I hear from them all the time.

The other thing I would like for them to keep in mind is that everything that appears in the book is not the author's opinion. There are a variety of opinions and views that appear in a given book. I would not

want them to extrapolate from what they read in the book and think this is what the author is trying to tell them, because I am not interested in messages per se; I am interested in options, possibilities. I don't want to be pushed into a corner as representing a particular point of view or moral perspective other than the moral perspective that we all have responsibility for one another. I wouldn't want anyone to use my books in a didactic way: "See, this is what she means, this is what she is saying, this is what you should do." I would much rather have kids read all the options in my books, other people's books, anything they can get their hands on, and then make their own decisions. That's what it's all about, the options that are available out there, the reasoned decisions people make based on the information that they gather.

(Interview from 1997 about Why KS, Linda Jones McCoy EdD)