

Lemony Snicket

Teachingbooks.net Original In-depth

Lemony Snicket, interviewed in San Francisco, California on March 26, 2012.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Who is Lemony Snicket?

LEMONY SNICKET: I am Lemony Snicket. I am the author of a great number of books, and I recommend *none* of them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why did you write the series of books called A Series of Unfortunate Events?

LEMONY SNICKET: Once I was in the library and I was looking at all the books that were on the shelf, and there were no books that were written about the Baudelaire orphans. There were no books that were written about Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, and the terrible fire that consumed their home and the dreadful man, Count Olaf, with whom they were forced to live, and all of the terrible things that kept happening over and over again. So it was a void that I sensed on the shelf, and I thought I would fill it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Had you written books before?

LEMONY SNICKET: I was always interested in writing, and so even when I was child I wrote small things on folded-up pieces of paper that were occasionally stapled together. Whether that's a book or not, I feel, is a long debate. Some people say, yes, of course, that counts as a book. Other people say, no, don't be ridiculous, that doesn't count as a book. And other people say, why are you bothering me? Why are you coming to me with this guestion about pieces of paper stapled together? Don't you have something better to do with your time?

TEACHINGBOOKS: How would you describe your books?

LEMONY SNICKET: If I had to sum up all of my work in a single word, I think the word would be "eqad." "Eqad" is a four-letter word, but you're allowed to use it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your childhood like?

LEMONY SNICKET: When I was a child, I was much shorter than I am now.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you grow up liking word games and playing with words?

LEMONY SNICKET: I grew up reading and writing fairly obsessively. My favorite place to be was a library. There were certain bookstores that I admired very much. But any place where people could leave me alone where I could read was my idea of a good time. It still is.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you like to write?

LEMONY SNICKET: When I was a child, I was very, very interested in books. I kept many near my bed so that I could read well into the evening, or so I would have something heavy to throw at a burglar. I was very interested in literature, both for reading and for warding off predators.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why don't you recommend people read your books?

LEMONY SNICKET: Despite my best efforts, I've heard that some people, even children, accidentally pick up these books and read them. If you see a book by Lemony Snicket, react the way you would if you saw a scorpion. Step slowly away and read something else. No one picks up a scorpion and tries to read it. No one says, "I have a few minutes before bed, I think I'll try to read a chapter of this scorpion." Nobody says that. That's also how you should behave with books about Lemony Snicket.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Don't you want to sell your books?

LEMONY SNICKET: No. I'm not interested in selling these books to people. I wrote these books because I think the story is crucial. I think that it's a story that hadn't been told before. I think no one had known about what had happened to the Baudelaire orphans, that it was very important that I write it down. But it's like the phone book. It's important information, but no one should take it down and read it. So I've never been interested in finding readers for my work. I've been interested in finding readers and turning them away from my work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have called your books "grim" and other depressing words. Why do you suppose they have those manifestations?

LEMONY SNICKET: I would describe these books as grim, dreadful, printed on paper, illustrated. There are many horrible terms for these books. The books tell a dreadful and depressing story. Most people who read them find themselves getting distressed and unnerved. Many people end up tearing out their own hair, and that's why when you wander the streets you see so many bald and sad people. It's because they've read books by Lemony Snicket and they've lived to regret it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did The Series of Unfortunate Events get started? Did you know that there were going to be 13 books?

LEMONY SNICKET: Well, when I began to research into the tale of the Baudelaire orphans and I began to take notes on the case, the notes filled 13 volumes, and so it seemed appropriate to me that they would be published sequentially in 13 volumes. I also think 13 is just a perfect round number.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was your sequence for writing your books?

LEMONY SNICKET: Well, my process for writing is fairly simple. First I do research, I read as much as I can about the relevant settings and characters. I write down a whole lot of notes. I drink a great deal of tea. I pace around my room. I slowly get distracted and read other books. I get depressed about the state of the world and I cry a little bit. I take a long walk and cry harder. I get home and wash the mud off myself from my long walk. I take to bed. I drink a little bit more tea, and eventually a book gets written.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you journal or outline?

LEMONY SNICKET: I think when you are writing a book, particularly a book about terrible things, it's very important to make an outline. So, for instance, if there's a dead person on the sidewalk, take a piece of chalk and draw an outline around him, so if the dead person is removed, you can remember where the dead person was, and that will help you write your book. Always use an outline.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How does editing your books work?

LEMONY SNICKET: Because my books are so depressing and even dangerous, when I'm done with a book, I can't just mail it to an editor. If she opened a package, and was surprised by such a horrible manuscript, she might fall into a coma. I usually wrap it up in a package and put it someplace safe, then send her a note saying where the package is so that she may go and retrieve it. Then she looks over the book very, very slowly, because if she looks at it for any long length of time, she usually faints dead away.

She might read two words, take a long five-day vacation, come back, finish the sentence, etc. If she has any questions, she tries to reach me by telegram or fax.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you know when the final book was over? How did you know when *The End* was the end?

LEMONY SNICKET: When I wrote the last volume in A Series of Unfortunate Events, which was called *The End*, I wrote the last paragraph and the last sentence and the last word, and then I ended it with a dot, which is known as a period, I took a great sigh of relief and a great sigh of dread.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe the premise of A Series of Unfortunate Events.

LEMONY SNICKET: A Series of Unfortunate Events tells the story of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire. They are three siblings. They are charming. Violet has a very strong mechanical mind. Klaus is a very strong reader, and Sunny is a baby and likes to bite things. The three of them go to the beach where they hear almost immediately that, while they were at the beach, their parents perished in a terrible fire. They're then sent to live with an obscure relative whose name is Count Olaf, who proves to be most unpleasant. He's a treacherous person. He's dishonest. He's greedy. He has poor grooming habits. He's bossy. He's all of the unpleasant characteristics we've all come to hate in various adults we know.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you research these stories?

LEMONY SNICKET: I tried to follow the trail of the Baudelaire orphans as best I could. So I conducted interviews with people, asking if they knew anything about the Baudelaire orphans. I read about terrible things that had happened to orphans in various parts of the world. And I took voluminous notes on all of the books that I had read, until they began to tell the story of the Baudelaire orphans. Then I began to tell the tale of the Baudelaire orphans, and then I got very depressed.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you treat your depression?

LEMONY SNICKET: I found that the best cure for getting depressed while being associated with my own work is to curl up into a ball and to rock back and forth until you feel better, like this. You should do this until it becomes irritating.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you know your representative, Daniel Handler?

LEMONY SNICKET: Daniel Handler is a very talented and handsome man who has agreed to represent me when there are circumstances that prevent my appearing on camera, on television, at a library, at a bookstore, at a school, walking down the street, going into a restaurant, going on a roller coaster, going into an automobile, on a ship, on a plane, and other situations that prove unnatural for me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your unauthorized autobiography.

LEMONY SNICKET: *The Unauthorized Autobiography* was a book that I wrote about my own life that was compiled without my permission and published. It is full of information that most people find very confusing and distressing. I was recently visiting a hospital where there were some newborn babies. The newborn babies were crying, and I concluded that the babies had been reading *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography*. There was no other explanation for so many small babies crying in a clean room.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share some examples of information covered in *The Unauthorized Autobiography.*

LEMONY SNICKET: Contained in *The Unauthorized Autobiography* are diary entries, obituaries, strange photographs, maps, questions, answers to things that the questions weren't asking, questions that don't have any answers that relate to the answers that were given for the first set of questions, and more and more confusing items. The more people dive into *The Unauthorized Autobiography*, the less satisfied and the more unhappy they become.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about the movie, A Series of Unfortunate Events.

LEMONY SNICKET: I've watched parts of the movie, and it made me weep. It's very upsetting. I think it's always upsetting to see a movie in which terrible things happen.

I think everyone's idea of a good movie would be a movie about happy people who would be unthreatened, who would be having a lovely day, perhaps making animals out of yarn, eating something delicious, such as a piece of dry toast. That's what people like in a film. And instead, what they made was a film that adopted my work into a nonstop parade—a carnival of horror and dismay.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you have a role in the making of the movie?

LEMONY SNICKET: My role in the filming of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* was begging them to stop. And when it became clear that they weren't going to stop, I suggested that they use the title "This Theater is Closed," so that when you saw it on the marquee of a movie theater you wouldn't go inside. They never took my advice.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you ever talk to your readers? And if so, what do you tell them?

LEMONY SNICKET: Well, I have had occasion to correspond with various people who have read A Series of Unfortunate Events. We usually correspond via post, although some of them use the electronic mail. And I sympathize with them. They often write and tell me how upset they are about the stories they read. And I say, "I tried to warn you the best I could. I'm sorry that my warnings weren't strong enough." I take personal responsibility for their unhappiness, and then I suggest that they do something else with their time, such as learn how to imitate the lope of a gazelle.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you imitate the lope of a gazelle?

LEMONY SNICKET: No. I don't have the faintest idea how to imitate the lope of a gazelle, but I'm sure someone can figure out how to do that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What else is in the letters that readers send you?

LEMONY SNICKET: The letters I receive from readers of my books are full of exclamation points. They're often very excited and disturbed people. And so if you're ever curious what a letter to Lemony Snicket looks like, usually at various parts of the page a long line and then a dot at the end of it, at the end of an upsetting sentence, such as, "This book is ghastly," or, "I couldn't put it down," or, "I'm having trouble sleeping," or, "Won't you help me," which, of course, really should have a question mark at the end.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you have any advice for students on their writing skills?

LEMONY SNICKET: My advice to anyone who wants to be a writer is to carry a notebook with you so that you can write down anything that you ever hear or any idea that you have so you might be able to use it later. When you're eavesdropping on someone and taking notes on their conversation, the important thing is to have an excuse ready so that when you are caught eavesdropping, you'll be able to explain.

An excuse I like to use is, "I thought I dropped a pencil somewhere around here." So that it's good to have a notebook, a pen so you can write notes, and a pencil that you can put down on

the floor, so when you're caught eavesdropping, you can say, "Oh, there it is. There's that pencil. That's why I was crawling outside your bedroom, Mother."

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do the Baudelaire orphans and Count feel about your books?

LEMONY SNICKET: The last I heard, the Baudelaire orphans were in no position to complain about their story being told. I hope that I have done right by them by trying to write down the story as faithfully as possible. As for Count Olaf or any of his associates who would read my account, I can only hope that it inspires them to lead better lives thereafter.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you need their permission to write their stories?

LEMONY SNICKET: I don't think anyone needs anyone's permission to write down a story. If you're interested in writing a story about somebody, you should do it. If you're interested, for instance, in writing a story about someone you know because you think they're up to something suspicious or deadly, you should definitely do it. You shouldn't ask their permission.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you ever feel threatened writing the story of the Baudelaire orphans?

LEMONY SNICKET: I faced two big obstacles while writing the story. One was the threat that the people I was writing about would come after me and that I would be beset upon by an army of enemies who would cause me great physical harm. The other obstacle was paper cuts. I find paper cuts very irritating.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you have any paper cuts on your hands now?

LEMONY SNICKET: I can't tell. My hands are scarred with years of literary work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you ever feel that you were writing for children or was it just coincidence that the children became the readers of A Series of Unfortunate Events?

LEMONY SNICKET: Many people ask me what age is appropriate to read A Series of Unfortunate Events? My answer is always the same: no age whatsoever. Perhaps if you are 109 years old and you've had a terrible life and been beaten down by numerous tragedies and you don't mind that if you pick up a book that might upset you so much that you would drop down dead, perhaps that's an appropriate age. But if you're under 109, I don't recommend them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are some differences in writing for adults versus children?

LEMONY SNICKET: I haven't noticed any difference in writing for adults compared to children, really. I'm just interested in an interesting story told in an interesting way. A Series of Unfortunate Events started as a novel that I thought was for adults, and it gradually grew into what it became. I've never understood the difference between writing for children or for adults, kind of like I don't really understand the difference between talking to children or talking to adults.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about the individual titles in A Series of Unfortunate Events.

LEMONY SNICKET: A Series of Unfortunate Events is a 13-volume series. In the first book, *The Bad Beginning*, the Baudelaire orphans learn that their parents have been killed in a fire and are sent to live with Count Olaf. In the second volume, *The Reptile Room*, they're living with another relative, but Count Olaf pursues them. In the third volume, *The Wide Window*, they go to live with their Aunt Josephine, and trouble ensues. In *The Miserable Mill*, they're forced to work at a lumber mill. In *The Austere Academy*, they are forced to go to school, and it's a terrible place.

In the sixth book, *The Ersatz Elevator*, they end up falling down an elevator shaft. In the seventh book, *The Vile Village*, they are chased out of town by an angry mob. It goes on and on and on. In the eighth, *The Hostile Hospital*, there are medical experiments ... no one wants to know about those. Nine, *The Carnivorous Carnival*, lions, I don't really want to talk about that anymore.

Ten, *The Slippery Slope*, lost in the Arctic. It's terrible, terrible business. Number 11, *The Grim Grotto*, in the depths of the ocean where darkness and trouble ensue. Twelve, *The Penultimate Peril*, they're in a hotel. I don't really like to talk about that at all. And then finally *The End*, which was full of death and destruction and despair, and anyone who reaches it usually has already collapsed of mental and physical exhaustion.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Since your books are true, why are they located in the fiction area of the library?

LEMONY SNICKET: The stories in A Series of Unfortunate Events are real. They are as real as I, Lemony Snicket, am. They're as real as anything. It's true that the books are often filed in the fiction section, which is a mistake. The books, whenever I see them in a library or a bookstore filed in the fiction section, I go and I find a person who's in charge and I say, "These books should not be in the fiction section. They should be in the dumpster behind the library or bookstore."

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about The Composer Is Dead.

LEMONY SNICKET: *The Composer Is Dead* began as a piece for narrator and orchestra, not unlike *Peter and the Wolf*, where a narrator tells the tale of a murder, of a suspicious death of a composer, and each instrument in the orchestra is questioned. This piece for narrator and orchestra was turned into a recording by the San Francisco Symphony, and the recording is tucked into the back of a book containing the text of *The Composer Is Dead* with some illustrations by Carson Ellis. I like to think that the music is a butterfly and that the recording of the music is a pinning down of the butterfly, and that the book is a box in which the pinned butterfly can be preserved for display.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk about your holiday books.

LEMONY SNICKET: I've written two books for the holidays. One is called *The Lump of Coal* and the other is called *The Latke Who Couldn't Stop Screaming: A Christmas Story*. Both of them take place toward the end of the year when the days are very short, when the nights are long, when the weather is cold, and when people start to worry that they need to buy many voluminous presents for people they hardly know and might not even like.

I have also written a book with Maira Kalman, a fantastic painter who has illustrated many books of her own and many of other people's books, and then decided after many years to wreck her entire career by working with me on a book called *13 Words*, which tries to explain the entire universe in a short story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Were there 13 words in your book, 13 Words?

LEMONY SNICKET: There are more than 13 words in *13 Words*, but *13 Words* is about 13 words. But it takes more than 13 words to describe 13 words in *13 Words*, and that's what *13 Words* is about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's it like to collaborate with Maira Kalman?

LEMONY SNICKET: Collaborating with Maira Kalman is quite a delight because Maira has a very well-guarded and safe apartment. When I go there, I feel very safe, and I indulge in cake and piano playing and tea drinking.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Are you a musician?

LEMONY SNICKET: I play the accordion but I'm, at best, a gifted amateur musician. I enjoy listening to music very much, and I enjoy people who enjoy listening to music, and I enjoy musicians. Therefore, I stand around near musicians in the hopes of being taken for one of their own.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Does Daniel Handler play in a band?

LEMONY SNICKET: My associate, Daniel Handler, also plays the accordion—a little bit better than I do—and plays in some quasi-professional ensembles.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you have a typical workday?

LEMONY SNICKET: For me a typical workday begins with early, early rising in the morning, a little bit of breakfast, weeping, reading, waking up again because I seem to have fallen asleep, a light lunch, research, taking notes, getting the slow feeling that life means nothing, falling into a depression, experiencing sheer unhappiness, more weeping, panic, hysteria, dinner, bed.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is it with all your weeping?

LEMONY SNICKET: I weep every day for two reasons. One, because the stories that I write are very depressing and they upset me, and the other is that I often have excess saltwater near my eyes and weeping is the only way I know to get rid of it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you have any advice for teachers and librarians?

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LEMONY SNICKET: I think teachers and librarians are among the noblest people on earth. They work very, very hard for very little compensation. It's a terrific job, and it's very, very difficult. If you are a teacher or a librarian, I commend you for your efforts, and I suggest that you take the day off. In fact, if you're standing in a library or a school right now, why don't you just walk out? Why don't you just leave the young people there to do whatever they can do best alone, and just go out into the world and have a good time.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How does your family feel about the books that you've written?

LEMONY SNICKET: My family is ashamed of me, but I think most families are ashamed of the writer in their family.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why are most families ashamed of their writing relatives?

LEMONY SNICKET: I think writing usually carries a disreputable air with it. It's almost as if it has the smell of misery. When you become a writer, you know that you're going to become the sort of person who spoils family gatherings by being gloomy and literary.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you have a new series of books?

LEMONY SNICKET: It's true there's a new series. The new series is a secret, so I'm not mentioning it to anyone except librarians and booksellers and book readers and men, women, and children. The new series is called *All the Wrong Questions*. It is in four volumes. Each volume is a question. The first question is, *Who Could That Be at This Hour?* The series is about my own apprenticeship in a secret organization, so, for obvious reasons, I can't tell you anything about the books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How are you handling success?

LEMONY SNICKET: Well, it is true that many, many copies of A Series of Unfortunate Events have sold, and sometimes this endeavor is described as a success, but I would see it as a deep, deep failure. I wish that these books were available to hardly anyone. I wish that no one at all was interested in them, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to beg people to stay away. When I think of my failure to warn people away, I tend to get very shaky.

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