



Jane Yolen

Author Program In-depth Interview

Jane Yolen, interviewed from her home in Northampton, Massachusetts on March 19, 2007.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've written hundreds of books over a forty-year period, and still counting. Many of your characters and storylines involve messages of personal growth, perseverance, giving of oneself and the celebration of individual strengths and differences. How do you account for these messages being woven throughout your stories?

JANE YOLEN: When you read my stories, you are reading a twentieth/twenty-first century American woman, liberal, political activist who's writing fairy tales. Of course, you're going to get fairy tales where the young woman is strong, and people are willing to put their lives on the line, and they're speaking truth to power, and all that sort of stuff.

A hundred years from now, if anybody's still reading those stories, they may say, "Well, of course that's what these stories say, because people in Jane Yolen's time — in her social class, where she lived in New England — thought that way. I don't labor to put those things in my stories, but they're part of my moral compass.

We need to be aware that stories are told by individuals within communities at a certain time in history.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you believe that fairy tales and folk tales should be retold to better reflect the messages considered appropriate for contemporary life?

JANE YOLEN: Yes, but you have to understand the stories first. When I retell them, I retell them with love and compassion, but understanding. I like to do what is known as "redact" tales — another way of saying "fractured fairy tales."

In this day and age, we realize that people have different points of view from ours. So if I tell a story from another point of view, I'm saying to my reader, "You have to think about this story a little more." There are some interesting things that we've never explored in the original versions; things that we've always accepted, like Rumpelstiltskin being the bad guy, like the wolf being the bad guy." I think that there's a lot of that going on, and it's good. It makes us realize that there's more than one side to a story. If a child learns that message early on, that's great.

And if you look at many stories, *Puss in Boots*, and other stories like that, they're stories about "our" community against the other. Puss in Boots is allowed to kill the troll simply because he's a troll. The troll has been a very good neighbor for many years for the king, he's employed lots of people; he's never done anything bad. But because he's a troll, Puss in Boots is allowed to kill him, take his castle and all his lands, and give them to the Marquis of Carabas. Why?

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your collections, *Not One Damsel in Distress* and *Mightier Than the Sword* are both unconventional collections of tales about females as heroes and males not resorting to violence.

JANE YOLEN: The funny thing about writing those was it was much easier to find hearty heroines in folklore than it was to find young men who solved their problems without picking up the sword and cutting off somebody's head. A hero story that I would be reading would start out very promising, with the hero being the youngest son, nobody pays much attention to him, he has good friends, he's smart, he is caring, and at the last minute, he chops somebody's head off.

It took me three times as long to get the stories that I wanted for the collection of boy stories (*Mightier Than the Sword*) as it did for *Not One Damsel in Distress*. I had more stories than I knew what to do with for the girl collection. The boy collection was much harder.

It said to me that over the centuries, what has been prized in men has been lifting up the sword. But the idea of the man addressing the problem without that last masculine push has been not prized in heroic storytelling.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you see as the implications for today's children and gender stereotypes? Are the stories reflective of perpetuated gender roles?

JANE YOLEN: I think you still see that today, in stories where boys are being smart and inventive, the role of hero usually means that, in the end, they're going to pick up the sword. And you see that on the playgrounds, in the songs, in the movies. For every *Mulan* that you have, you do not have a corresponding young man who is a hero and does something with his heart rather than his sword arm.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What would you like to see change in literature for children to better empower boys to be heroes without resorting to violence?

JANE YOLEN: I think we need to turn some of our attention to boy fiction that is exciting, inventive, encouraging. I think we worked so hard on empowering girls, and have done a pretty good job of it, but I don't think we've put that same energy into showing boys using their brains and their hearts rather than their overwhelming strengths. Unfortunately, I don't see that happening right away.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How has your writing changed over the years?

JANE YOLEN: I have tackled some themes that I didn't think that I could earlier. For example, I thought about writing a novel for young adults about a girl and a boy, sort of Romeo and Juliet in a cult situation up on the mountains, and just didn't think I had the chops to do it. And then Bruce Coville and I wrote *Armageddon Summer* together, and that meant that I could do it. I've been trying for 10 years to sell a graphic novel, and suddenly last year, I sold two. I'm starting to write some small, animated movie scripts, including one of *The Little Mermaid*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Why had these kinds of projects eluded you earlier in your career?

JANE YOLEN: I'm always leery about novels. They just get away from me, maybe because there are so many parts to them. I love writing smaller things, because I can hold that plot in my hand or in my head when I'm writing. Whereas, when I'm trying to write a large novel, there not

only has to be an overarching plot, there have to be twists, and turns, and whirligigs, and I'm not great at that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Does poetry and rhymed verse feel like your natural style of writing? If so, why do you think that is?

JANE YOLEN: Rhymed verse feels like it's my voice in a way that some other things are not. I began as a poet even as a child, writing both rhyming and unrhymed stuff. Fiction came much later for me. Poetry, short fiction — short bursts of things — is really how I think. I grew up in with a family of people who sang folksongs. Folksongs, poetry and fairy tales informed what I was doing, even as a child. I wrote all the time.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have three grown children (plus grandchildren). Did the reading level of the books you write age with your children? Has the age level of your books been influenced by having grandchildren?

JANE YOLEN: Yes. When my own children were little, I was writing a lot of young stuff. And when they started reading, I was writing easy readers, like *Commander Toad*. And then as they grew up, I was still writing picture books, but also started writing older books. Now I seem to have cycled back. My oldest grandchildren are 24 and 12, so the graphic novels are for them. And I'm still writing younger books for the little ones.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've been writing since you were very young. How does your writing inform who you are? Please provide an example.

JANE YOLEN: Being a writer and having the kind of writing career that I've had has been an incredible gift. I recognized it as a gift while writing a story, which is how a lot of things happen to me. It's like going to therapy and having a breakthrough; I have breakthroughs in stories.

I wrote a book that is long out of print now, called *The Boy Who Had Wings*. In it, a boy who is born with wings wears little shirts his parents make to keep the wings down so that nobody will notice that he's different. His name was Aetos, which means eagle.

Then one day, the boy's father, who is a shepherd, gets caught up in the high hills in a snowstorm. Aetos unfurls his wings and rescues the father. In bringing his father back, the boy's wings get frostbitten and drop off. Then Aetos is just like everyone else. He's happy about this, but from that day on, all the people in the village pray to St. Aetos, wishing that their own children would have such beautiful wings.

I realized long after the book was written that it was about my being a writer, and how my talent had been a burden in high school, when all I wanted was to be one of the popular crowd.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

JANE YOLEN: I show them how books are made from creating the story all the way through to publication. I reinforce the fact that books take time. I tell them that if I wrote a story today, and it was perfect, which it never is, that by the time they could see it in print, they would probably be two, three or four grades higher up in school. I'd explain to them the process and why it takes so long to publish a book.

Kids always ask me which is my favorite of my books, and the answer is it's always one I'm working on now, because anything that you can be reading now is at least 2 or 3 years, and very often, 20, or 30, or 40 years old for me. The answer almost always is the book I'm working on now.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

JANE YOLEN: I like to tell teachers to please let the children read the books before they start breaking the stories into parts and lessons. Children don't fall in love with gerunds, and they don't fall in love with adverbial phrases, and they don't fall in love with metaphors. They fall in love with stories. Gordon Dickson, a famous science fiction writer said, "Let them fall through the words into the story." I always encourage teachers to let a child or a class read a book entirely through. And then go back and start looking at the story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

JANE YOLEN: A typical workday begins about 6:00 in the morning. I do all my email and have a cup of tea. Then I go and I sit down at the computer, and start to work. If I'm not interrupted, I usually write for about four, or five, or eight, or ten hours. A lot of my work is business stuff, too, like mail and contracts and talking with my agent and interviews.

In my first two hours this morning, I did a revision of a nonfiction piece, I did a little work on a poem, and I did a little work on *The Little Mermaid* script that I'm doing for a short animated film.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your writing process.

JANE YOLEN: My writing process is really watching what leaks out of my fingertips onto the computer keys. I'm a very instinctual writer. I do not sit down and make lots of plans, outlining. I tend to do what one friend called "flying off into the mist." I work on a variety of things during the day, unless there's a large piece that needs to be completed, and then I just focus on that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

JANE YOLEN: Because I write so many different kinds of things, it keeps me always engaged, and I never get blocks because if I block on one thing, I just turn to something else. I can be stuck on something for 20 years, but it doesn't stop me from writing, because I'm writing other things.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books have been illustrated by a multitude of illustrators. What's it like to see your words and stories illustrated by such a variety of styles?

JANE YOLEN: When I two or three different illustrators illustrate the same story, I get to read the story in a different way. I get to hear it in a different way. It means something to me in a different way.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You and your books have won a vast number and array of awards, from the Caldecott Medal to the Nebula Award, from a National Book Award nomination to the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, from the Golden Kite Award, to the Jewish Book Award, two Christopher Medals, many lifetime achievement awards, six honorary doctorate degrees, etc. What award or recognition means the most to you and why?

JANE YOLEN: What matters most to me are not the awards, but the letters from people who say that a book has changed their life or their child's life. A nurse wrote to me and said she read one of my stories to a dying child, who was sort of hanging around because the parents wanted her to live, but she was in such pain. And the book let her go.

I get letters like that, and I say, "That's why I'm on this earth. I'm here to tell stories that bring joy, or that bring truth, or that bring honesty, or that entertain. I'm here for that reason, and I've got to understand that that's my gift, and I have to use it."

Awards are nice, but the real point of it is, when someone writes and tells me this child has never read before until he read *Commander Toad*, or this little girl was having trouble in school until this book allowed her to say something to the teacher. Those sorts of stories are better than any awards.

Books by Jane Yolen

Jane Yolen has written hundreds of books – see her website for a bibliography organized by genre at: <http://www.janeyolen.com/genlst.html>

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