



Lois Lowry

**Author Program In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Movie and Slide Shows**

Lois Lowry interviewed while in Madison, Wisconsin on October 19, 2006.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Giver* [winner of the 1994 Newbery Medal] is often considered such a powerful book. How do you reflect on *The Giver* today?

LOIS LOWRY: When I was writing *The Giver*, and when I write any book, I don't think in terms of power. I think only of the story. In the case of *The Giver*, published in 1993, I still get emails and letters every day from kids and adults with reactions to it.

So my feeling about *The Giver* is now colored by all those thousands and thousands of responses that I've gotten over the years. The power in it for people seems to come from the questions that it raises in them about their own world and the world we've made and what the world will hold in the future.

Readers often share that "it would be great to feel so safe and protected. But, uh oh, look what they gave up." *The Giver* makes readers wonder about how we make decisions and weigh things. What do we value more, safety and comfort, or freedom?

Of course, kids get caught up in the story and relate to the boy, Jonas, and what he goes through. It's only later, when they see that Jonas is them and their future that readers can see how important the choices Jonas makes will be in their own lives, too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books seem to be written about youth who have the ability to affect change, and in turn your books seem to empower those who read them.

LOIS LOWRY: I care about kids. I have great faith in their basic integrity and optimism. If I didn't believe in young people, and the power that they have — that they'll be the ones to chart the course of our future and the future of this world, I wouldn't bother writing for them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you talk about *The Giver* and *Number the Stars* [winner of the 1990 Newbery Medal] as specific examples of this?

LOIS LOWRY: I hadn't really thought about it before, but *Number the Stars* presents some of the same problems, some of the same conflicts, and some of the same themes as *The Giver*. But interestingly, it's presenting them as things that have already happened as a part of our history. So unlike *The Giver*, which presents a boy facing a world full of uncompromising choices, in *Number the Stars* you go back not that far in time to World War II — a time when people faced such choices.

I set *Number the Stars* in Denmark because that's a place where people made choices that were difficult and showed enormous integrity. It was one of the only places, during World War II where such choices were made. The characters in *Number the Stars* are fictional, but they represent real people who lived then and made those choices then and did those things. It was

wonderful to show kids that here was a time when people like them — real people — stood up for what was right and made decisions that were world changing.

In *The Giver*, the world of Jonas — the world of the future — is a fictional one, but it could be the future that they'll have to face. Today's kids who are reading these books might have to face such decisions at some point.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Giver* received the 1994 Newbery Medal. Often authors have a fun story about the moment they learn they've won the Newbery award. What's your story?

LOIS LOWRY: Usually what happens is the Newbery Award Committee gets on a speakerphone and calls the author who is the recipient of the medal to tell them they've won.

Invariably, several authors are sitting by their phones that morning because they know that their book is under consideration. I knew that *The Giver* was under consideration, and I did not want to be sitting by my phone that morning in 1994, and so I had purposely gone as far away as possible.

When they tried to make that phone call, they couldn't find me because I was in Antarctica on a boat; I was there the whole month. However, I did get a little pink slip of paper shoved under the door of my cabin from the radio operator. It said, "Congratulations, *The Giver* has been awarded the 1994 Newbery Medal."

TEACHINGBOOKS: We've all come to think of the man on the cover of *The Giver* as The Giver himself. How did that image come to be used on the book jacket?

LOIS LOWRY: I love the jacket of *The Giver*, partly because I did it myself.

Many years before I wrote *The Giver*, when I was a journalist and a photographer, I was assigned to write an article about a man who was a painter. He lived on an island off the coast of Maine. I went to that island and spent time with that wonderful human being named Carl Nelson. While I was there, I photographed him.

He had since died, but I had kept a copy of that photograph because I loved his face so much. We used Carl Nelson's photograph on the cover of *The Giver*.

After it was published, a niece of Carl's told me that in the last five years of his life, Carl had been blind. Carl Nelson's life was filled with color; his paintings were often paintings of flowers, and he was a fabulous gardener. For him to lose color, as The Giver in the book begins to lose color, seemed such a wonderful analogy that I've always been glad his photograph is on the cover of the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In *Number the Stars*, what inspired you to have the father use the baby photo of his deceased daughter to vouch that the Jewish girl they were harboring was their daughter?

LOIS LOWRY: As a writer, thinking up plot elements is kind of a natural process. There's no organized way to go about it. You just put your imagination into play and think what might happen here, what could happen next, what would make this work.

I remember that when I was writing *Number the Stars*, I already had the photograph that was used on the cover. I took that photo of a Swedish child back when I was a professional photographer. I had photographs on my mind, and I was thinking that for the cover of *Number the*

Stars we could tear that photo in half and put the imprint of a soldier's boot across it. That turned out not to be what the book designer decided to do, but I had children's photographs on my mind.

That's why, when I was writing the scene about the soldiers being in the apartment, I had the father go to the photograph album. It also became part of the plot that the father could use that device — use those photographs to fool the soldiers into believing that the dark-haired child was one of his own.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Gossamer*, like your books *The Giver*, *Gathering Blue* and *Messenger*, is fantasy, yet *Gossamer* is set in contemporary times.

LOIS LOWRY: *Gossamer* includes a contemporary, realistic world that exists at the same time as the fantasy world. It was fun for me to do that — to create two separate worlds and have them coexist. There are the real people in this book that do not know about or ever see the other world.

The inhabitants of the fantasy world are called “dream-givers” — they're ephemeral little beings who enter our homes at night and give us our dreams. *Gossamer* presupposes that these little beings do exist and come into our homes at night, but there's nothing evil about them.

And unlike the forest, for example, in the book *Messenger*, which is so cruel and so evil in its fantasy, these little beings are there to bring us only good. It was fun and very satisfying to write about that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did the idea for the “dream-givers” and *Gossamer* come to you?

LOIS LOWRY: Coming up with a concept is a difficult process to describe because ideas just appear in one's imagination. There's no way you can set out to make your imagination work in a particular way. But I will say that there was a period of time, when my mother was very old and had had a stroke, and her mind had been temporarily damaged. For five months, she had to be in a nursing home, and often during that time, she didn't know who I or my brother was.

One day, my brother went to visit her, and she began to cry suddenly. It was not uncommon when she was in this state for her to suddenly start to laugh or cry. This day, she began to cry and say over and over again, “Dorothy's baby has died. Dorothy's baby has died. I'm so sad.”

Fifty years previous, my mother had a best friend named Dorothy whose newborn died when it was only a few days old. So my brother asked, “Mother, are you seeing Dorothy? Are you with Dorothy, or are you remembering Dorothy?” She looked at him as if he were a complete idiot and said, “In the dream world, it doesn't matter.”

When my mother's mind came back, she did not remember anything of those five months, so she was never able to tell us what that was all about. Yet, I was left with this idea of our mother being in this dream world — a place where the past and the present — all is combined. Time doesn't play any role in this world, and everything, “fragments,” as I use in *Gossamer*, all are combined and create this dream world.

The dream world is something that I continue to wonder about and be fascinated by. Dreams are really quite mysterious and often quite wonderful. So, that is sort of how *Gossamer* came to be.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your Gooney Bird Greene series is growing.

LOIS LOWRY: Yes. The Gooney Bird series began with the first one set in October when she enters school after the year has already started. I frequently did this as a child because my family moved a lot, so I remember what that was like. When I decided to write a second Gooney Bird book, I set it in November, and now the third one is set in December. My plan is to go through a school year, month by month.

Each book focuses on a different teaching device. In the first book, Gooney teaches the class how to tell stories, and the second one deals with words. I have in my mind several other things that this unusual and very outgoing, self-confident child can give to the whole class and her teacher. These books are fun to do.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have described yourself as having been a very shy child. Is Gooney Bird your alter ego?

LOIS LOWRY: Gooney Bird Greene is the child I wish I could have been, because I was a terribly shy, self-conscious child. I envied desperately those children who were outgoing and self-confident, but I was never one of them, so she probably is the child that I wished I could have been.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

LOIS LOWRY: I work at home. I have a house that used to belong to a doctor, who had his office in his home. When we bought the house, I turned the doctor's office into my office. It is kind of separate from the rest of the house, and I go to work each day the way a person would who takes a briefcase, gets on a subway and goes to an office. I don't take a briefcase, but I leave my breakfast behind, and I go into my office.

My office has one wall of bookcases filled with books, and one wall that has a very long, very messy desk with my computer on it. That's where I sit just about all day, every day.

When I first sit down at my desk, I do not start working right away. I turn instead to the shelf of books in my large bookcase that holds volumes of poetry. I always have a couple of current favorite volumes of poetry and favorite poets. Right now they are Mary Oliver and Billy Collins. I'll pull out one of those books, turn pages at random, and read some poetry.

The reason I read poetry before I write is because, more than a novel or a newspaper, reading the work of a good poet gives me an excitement about language. I love to start the day that way. It revs me up and into thinking about how words go together in just the right ways. Then I turn to my own work, hopefully affected by the exhilaration that reading poetry gives to me.

Because I work for myself, if I want to sneak off and go to a movie in the afternoon, I can do that. However, my office is my favorite place to be, and I sit there at my desk, writing books or answering mail or writing speeches, all the subsidiary things that authors do.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your writing process.

LOIS LOWRY: When I start a book, I do not have an outline or even a very good plan. All I have is a character who has appeared in my mind. So when I begin a book, I don't have a title, but I type page one and I begin to write about that character. I put that character on a page and have them doing something so that I get a feel — and therefore the reader will get a feel — for where and who that character is.

So for example, I had created Annemarie Johansen for *Number the Stars* in my mind, and I placed her at the beginning on a street in Copenhagen, where I knew she would be, and I began to move her around, doing the things a person like her would do.

I placed Jonas on a bicycle at the beginning of *The Giver*. I wrote a paragraph, and there was a boy riding a bicycle.

I don't know really, at that point, what's going to happen next. I simply keep writing. So what happens next is as much a surprise to me as it is eventually for the reader. Of course, as I'm surprising myself, day after day, it begins to get a little more complicated, a little more organized, because then I have to pay attention to things like, well, if this is going to happen, then that should have happened earlier. So I then go back and rewrite some pages.

As I'm going along, I begin to feel a new character almost knocking on the door and asking to be in this book. They appear on the page, coming out of my own fingertips, onto the computer screen. I may realize, "Uh oh, this is an interesting character, but he needs to have appeared sooner." So that means I go back.

This is why a computer makes my work much easier than it used to be when I used a typewriter. If a character walks into the book in chapter five, and I think, "Oh, dear, that character needs to be introduced earlier," I can go back to chapter two and have the character pop in there.

That will mean, of course, a lot of other changes, because that character now is going to influence chapter three and four. There's a constant revision going on as I write. It's not that I write the book all the way through and then read it and then revise it. It's going back, rewriting, and then writing forward, and then going back, rewriting, and writing more forward.

This approach keeps me interested, because I usually don't know what's going to happen until it's about to happen. In *Number the Stars*, when a chapter ends with, "Let's open the coffin," of course you want to read what will happen next. Well, picture me writing it. When I wrote, "Let's open the coffin," I was excited to find out the next day, when I went back to my desk, what they were going to find when they opened that coffin.

It is a fun process for me. When a complete draft is finished, I print out the manuscript, close the door to my office, and I read it aloud. I need to hear the way the words sound. I can hear them in my imagination, but until I say them, I can't hear if the sound is going to be right. There will be places where the sound of the words doesn't go together well, and those I'll change.

But also, in that rereading of the first version, I'll find other things that are confusing or that I need to make clearer to the reader, and so then I'll go back and start another revision process.

I do love doing this. I can't imagine a place I'd rather be than sitting there at that desk.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have said that you love to play with words and string them together to make sentences.

LOIS LOWRY: It's a whole lot of fun to sit at a desk and fool around with language and words.

Since I was a child, I've been fascinated by words. I had my private notebook in which I would sometimes just write lists of words that appealed to me (as my character Anastasia Krupnik does).

Now, I'll read a passage in a book I've written, and I'll be struck by certain words. And sometimes in rereading, I'll wish I had used a different word because of the sound and the way they go together and the cadence that they create.

But a funny thing happens when I use word play, specifically in my lighter-hearted books. When the books go into translation in other countries, translators have a very hard time communicating the word play intended. Luckily, translators are very ingenious and they find ways of dealing with it, but I hear occasionally how tough I make it on them when I do little gimmicky things with words. But for me, that's part of the fun of writing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

LOIS LOWRY: Kids often email or write me and ask if I ever suffer from writer's block. The truth is, I don't. There will be times when I need time off to think about what's going to be next, and I find that my subconscious works on things even while I'm having dinner or going to sleep. By the next morning, when I return to it, the writing comes quite easily to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

LOIS LOWRY: I tell kids who are interested in writing that they should pretend they're telling a story to a friend.

One of my granddaughters, who is almost 10, is an avid reader. I was with her recently and she began telling me about a book she had been reading. She was so excited telling me that she talked and talked, and she was really very articulate about it because she was just telling it to me. She was telling me a story that excited her.

I don't know this for certain about her, but my guess is if somebody had handed her a pen and paper and said, "Please write the plot of the book that you're now reading," she would not have been as exuberant or as articulate about it. She would have been a little undone by the formal process of writing. I think to tell a story to a friend is the way you should go about writing fiction.

When I get emails from kids, as I do every day, if they send me one with absolutely no punctuation, I send it back to them, and say, "I'm sorry. I can't understand what you're asking me because you haven't put in any punctuation. Please punctuate your email and send it back." Sometimes, they do.

Books by Lois Lowry

All titles published by Houghton Mifflin.

- GOONEY THE FABULOUS (illustrated by Middy Thomas), 2007
- GOSSAMER, 2006
- GOONEY BIRD AND THE ROOM MOTHER (illustrated by Middy Thomas), 2005
- MESSENGER, 2004
- SILENT BOY, THE, 2003
- GOONEY BIRD GREENE (illustrated by Middy Thomas), 2002
- GATHERING BLUE, 2000
- ZOOMAN SAM (illustrated by Diane de Groat), 1999
- LOOKING BACK: A BOOK OF MEMORIES, 1998
- STAY!: KEEPER'S STORY (illustrated by True Kelley), 1997
- SEE YOU AROUND, SAM! (illustrated by Diane de Groat), 1996
- ANASTASIA, ABSOLUTELY, 1995
- GIVER, THE, 1993
- ATTABOY, SAM! (illustrated by Diane de Groat), 1992
- ANASTASIA AT THIS ADDRESS, 1991
- YOUR MOVE, J.P.!, 1990
- NUMBER THE STARS, 1989
- ALL ABOUT SAM (illustrated by Diane de Groat), 1988
- ANASTASIA'S CHOSEN CAREER, 1987

- RABBLE STARKEY, 1987
- ANASTASIA HAS THE ANSWERS, 1986
- ANASTASIA ON HER OWN, 1985
- SWITCHAROUND, 1985
- ANASTASIA, ASK YOUR ANALYST, 1984
- US AND UNCLE FRAUD, 1984
- ONE HUNDREDTH THING ABOUT CAROLINE, THE, 1983
- TAKING CARE OF TERRIFIC, 1983
- ANASTASIA AT YOUR SERVICE (decorations by Diane de Groat), 1982
- ANASTASIA AGAIN! (decorations by Diane de Groat), 1981
- AUTUMN STREET, 1980
- ANASTASIA KRUPNIK, 1979
- FIND A STRANGER, SAY GOODBYE, 1978
- SUMMER TO DIE, A (illustrated by Jenni Oliver), 1977

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