

## Interview Questions with Bonnie Graves

### ***At what point did you consider yourself a full-time writer?***

Full time? Don't I wish! Although there were periods when I made writing (not my fiction projects) the main focus of my day, those mainly occurred when I was working on textbook projects with my professor husband and deadlines loomed. Writing fiction, for me at least, is a bit different. Unless I'm under a contract, which also has a deadline, time spent on task ("butt in chair time", we writers like to call it) varies with the project. Some days I'll write for hours, other days, those with meetings, appointments, travel and such, I may write little or nothing . . . on paper or the computer, that is.

### ***Do you have a writing routine?***

Actually, I write every day—To-Do lists, email, notes to family and friends, and narratives for the yearbooks I make for each of my four grandkids each year. When I'm working on my own writing projects, I'm typically drawn to the computer every day when I'm not traveling or hosting guests in our home. If I'm really deep into a project, it's difficult to stop sometimes. When I was younger, story ideas continually popped into my brain. After a time, I just had to start pushing them away. There just weren't hours in the day to pursue them all.

### ***How long does it take you to write a book?***

Writing a book and publishing a book are two different things. You really can't call a story or novel a "book" until it is published. For most authors I know, writing a "book" is a complex process and varies with each individual project. But, for me, the average is probably over ten years from that initial draft to publication. The first scribbles I made for my most recent book, *Catch Me When I Fall*, were written in 1998. After years of research and revision after revision, it was finally published by Fitzroy Books in 2019. I still have several manuscripts of yet-to-be published novels and chapter book tucked away in boxes in my office and as e-files on my computer, hoping one day to become books!

### ***Do you research settings, characters types, or topic for your works?***

Most every book will require some research as issues or details come up that need accuracy or fleshing out, especially historical fiction. Research played a huge role in writing *Catch Me When I Fall* since it takes place during the Great Depression of the 1930s, an era I didn't live through. I had to do reams of research on the Depression—from clothing to expressions spoken, to the popular culture then—movies, books, transportation and so on. The circus is a central part of the story and the little I knew about circuses came from going to them and watching movies with circuses in them. So, I did a lot of research on circuses during the Depression and also on aerialists, their equipment and the tricks they do, flying high about the sawdust. I got a lot of help from the aerialists themselves and from circus historians.

### ***Do you belong to a writing group or do you have trusted others who read your drafts?***

I don't belong to any formal writers' group at the moment because, since my husband retired and we travel a lot, it's hard to be consistent about attending meetings. But a writers' group has played a huge part in my journey as a writer, and I've belonged to various groups over the years. I remember how hard it was going to that first writers' meeting. I felt, "I'm really not a writer. What am I doing with a group of writers? They'll probably just laugh at my work." But taking that risk was probably one of the best things I could have done. I would have never improved my writing skills and never become a published writer. Much of my success is due to my writer friends, who not only gave me valuable feedback on my writing, but confidence to continue writing and to submit my work for publication. Now I have writer friends who are willing to read and critique my work without actually meeting in person. One of these friends, Margo Sorenson, lives in California. I live in Minnesota. Distance matters little since the internet.

### ***Do you have books you read for inspiration?***

Oh, yes. Great works by others always inspire me. As for children's or YA fiction, Katherine Paterson was the first author whose work inspired me. Now there are many fine writers of fiction for youth. Kate DiCamillo's work I especially admire. For inspiration on writing in general, I turn to Anne Lamont's *Bird by Bird*, Madeline L'Engle's *Circle of Quiet*, and Elizabeth George's *Write Away*, to name a few. Additionally, I have shelves full of books on writing technique, the publishing business, and writing in general.

### ***Do you write in multiple genres?***

My first published works were short stories for "reluctant" readers. My first published fiction were chapter books published by Hyperion Books for Children. I've also written several non-fiction books and co-authored college textbooks on Teaching Reading. *Catch Me When I Fall* is my first work of historical fiction for a middle grade audience.

### ***Do you ever have epiphanies while writing?***

Part of the business of writing fiction, at least for me, is to try to make sense and order out of a world that seems at times to present more questions than answers. In my creative works, I find myself trying to answer the same questions over and over: Which is more powerful, human will or circumstance? Why do people make the choices they do? What do people do when dreams are dashed? Will cynicism and despair win out or hope and optimism? What unites us one to the other and what separates us? What can bring us together despite our differences? Often the youthful characters in my stories seem to be asking—Who am I? Is it OK to be me? And what is my place in the world? As my characters struggle through these questions, epiphanies often do occur.

Those “aha” moments where characters might suddenly understand, at least for the moment, something they’ve been struggling to know.

### ***What do your novels start with, a plot, a character, a central question?***

Yes, yes and yes! Typically, what happens is that a character appears to me, a character with perhaps a problem, or a goal, or both and says, “How am I going to solve this?” or “How am I going to get what I so desperately want, must have?” Together we use story to figure it out. That story of struggle to find answers or achieve goals is the plot.

### ***Do you see reoccurring themes in your fiction?***

Most of my stories turn out to be a variation of Who am I? and Where do I belong? I can’t think of one of my works of fiction that doesn’t try to answer these questions. As one reviewer wrote, “. . . *Catch Me When I Fall* has the question “who am I?” at its heart. Emma’s poignant search for that answer will captivate young readers. “

### ***What is the story of getting your first book published? Did you have an agent, did you send to multiple publishers, etc.***

My first published book, *The Best Worst Day*, was published by Hyperion Books for Children, which is now Disney-Hyperion. When I first started sending it around to publishers, back in the day when editors would actually look at unagented manuscripts, the comments I’d get were, “We like your manuscript. But what is it? A picture book or a novel?” I had no idea. I’d written a story with chapters whose main character was seven-years-old. I knew it wasn’t a picture book and didn’t think it quite merited novel status. So, what was it? I sent it around for years, revising here and there, getting positive comments but no takers. Then, one day, I get a call from an editor at Hyperion. “We love your manuscript,” she says, “and would like to publish it.” Unfortunately, I had no idea which manuscript she was talking about since I’d sent so many different manuscripts to so many different editors. I had to keep her talking until she revealed it was *The Best Worst Day* she wanted to publish. Hyperion had just started a new line of books, chapter books for beginning readers, and they were eager to add *The Best Worst Day* to that line. Timing is everything. The agent I had acquired just a few months earlier negotiated the contract for me, along with the two other chapter books I placed with Hyperion—*The Mystery of the Tooth Gremlin* and *No Copycats Allowed!*.

### ***How much say do you have on the covers of your books?***

In the books where I hold the copyright, that is, the books not written as “works for hire,” I’m always given the opportunity to weigh in on the cover and the interior illustrations.

### ***What questions do you frequently get from teachers and librarians? From students?***

The three biggies are always “Where do you get your ideas,” “How long does it take you to get a book published?” And, only from students, “How much money do you make?”

***What jobs did you do before becoming a writer and do any of them influence how or what you write?***

I had many jobs during High School and College. My first job was at Disneyland in Anaheim, CA and, coincidentally, my first book *The Best Worst Day* was published by Disney-Hyperion. Every job (every aspect of your life for that matter), in one way or another, influences who you are and what you write, but it was my career as a teacher and role as mother that probably most influenced how and what I write. When teaching in Southern California, instead of staying inside at recess and correcting papers and such, I would often play outside with my students. One parent told me, “You’re just one of them.” After having my own children and reading so many wonderful books to them and then getting the opportunity to write stories for the Indian Upward Bound program at the University of Minnesota, the stage was set. Even though these stories weren’t published in the traditional sense, my daughter’s first grade teacher invited me to speak to her class as a children’s author. If the hat fits, I guess you wear it. I walked onto that first stage, that first grade classroom, as “children’s author.”

***Do you have any advice or suggestions for other writers?***

My advice to aspiring children’s writers is not unique, more like a well-worn shoe, one that will feel familiar to many a writer/author.

1. Read, read, read. Continue devouring the books that your favorite authors are writing. They are your teachers. Learn from them.
2. Connect with the child in you. Try to see, hear and feel the way a child does so the child reader will see him or herself in your protagonist.
3. Take the risk, the plunge, and just begin, write!
4. Find encouraging people to read what you write and give encouragement. This was so critical to me early on, and I feel I wouldn’t be published today if it weren’t for my writers’ groups and fellow author cheerleaders, whose sound advice and encouragement kept me going on many a dark day.
5. Revise, revise, revise. You’d be shocked to see the number of manuscripts spilling from my closet and file folders on my computer.
6. Submit, submit, submit. No publisher is going to know about your fabulous book unless you send it to them. Unfortunately, fewer and fewer publishers will read unsolicited, unagented material these days, so it’s important to research the houses that might be willing to look at your manuscript and to join organizations like SCBWI and go to writers’ conferences where editors and agents speak and often open their doors to read your work.
7. Learn how to deal with rejection. Don’t let a few rejections stop you, or even a hundred. It’s part of the job description. Own it, don’t let it own you!
8. Persevere. If there is one quality I can attribute most to success in being published, it’s perseverance. You just gotta keep at it, otherwise it ain’t gonna happen. Sorry. It’s

blood, sweat, tears. It's ignoring family and friends and family who just shake their heads and question your sanity and tell you to get a real job. Nuh-uh. You can't listen to them if you want to get published. Listen to your heart. Tap into your soul. Be true to yourself. Persevere.

***What book have you read over the last year that seems to stick with you?***

Actually, there are two. One is *Words No Bars Can Hold* by Deborah Appleman, chronicling Appleman's years of experience teaching literacy to inmates in a high security prison and the other *Educated*, a memoir by Tara Westover. Both, in their own unique way, are testimonials to the power of education and literacy to transform lives.