

SCHOLASTIC INTERVIEW

with *Virginia Frances Schwartz*

What inspires you to write?

Inspiration is that thing that moves us to create. It can be external, like an event in the world or a person who says something that sparks us; or it can be internal, arising from a feeling or thought. It can be sudden or it can brew inside us like a storm.

Most of my ideas come from images. I am a visual writer. I "see" images like Solomon's face or a slave walking along the Underground Railroad and I pay attention to the feeling of that.

When the images brew awhile, I begin to hear words. And then I write them down. Reading is another source of inspiration. When I first read the slave narratives, interviews with ex-slaves at the end of the Civil War, I was so moved by their stories of being torn apart from their families and how their ancestors were stolen from their homeland, that I felt compelled to write about slavery. My first two novels, *If I Just Had Two Wings* and *Send One Angel Down*, came out of those readings.

The word most associated with inspiration is "muse". A muse is a visitor who appears with ideas and then vanishes. The Muse in ancient Greek mythology is responsible for all creativity. She is often depicted as having wings, a long white gown, and sandaled feet. I'll tell you a story I heard from the beloved picture book writer and illustrator, Vera B. Williams:

"One evening, I was home alone, thinking and wondering about my work. The Muse walked down my street. She stopped at several houses and knocked, asking to come in. Each person said that they were busy watching a movie, playing a video game, talking on the phone, or text messaging, and said to come back later. But the Muse could not wait. She turned away. The Muse finally knocked on the last door along the street, my

door. When I saw her, I recognized her outfit, opened the door wide, and invited her in. For I had a book to write and I needed her help."

What this speaks about is the importance of paying attention to inspiration. When it comes - listen -- and as soon as possible, write down or act upon what inspires you. It will vanish soon.

What advice do you have for young writers?

Inspiration is the fun part of writing. We never know when it will happen. Meanwhile, we work at our writing. The famous painter Picasso said that, "Inspiration exists but it has to find you working first."

So if you want to write, you also need to: *Show up. Don't judge. Share your work. Read.*

Show up means that you write often, several times a week. When you do something regularly, it gets easier. The words will appear much easier when you show up. Make a schedule of the best time to write. For me, it is early morning.

Don't judge your writing. Accept what comes. Allow your voice to speak. Gradually, you will improve.

Share your work. Read your work aloud to a friend. Get other people's opinions.

Read. Read and study other authors. Figure out how they do what do. I love Gary Paulsen's work. In brief, tight language, he can move my heart. How does he do that? I read and reread his novels.

Keep a notebook nearby and one in your pocket. When inspiration visits, you will be ready.

What was your favourite book when you were growing up?

Anne of Green Gables. It spoke to me of the themes of possibilities, transformation and natural beauty. When we read, we internalize without even knowing it. Years and years later, those same themes showed up in my own writing.

What do you like to do when you're not writing?

I love to be outside where bee balm flowers, blueberries and organic veggies grow in my garden, or I take long walks or do yoga. My favourite thing of all is to swim in the pond on the mountain top near my farm. My companions are deer, barn swallows, a lone blue heron, hawks, eagles, frogs and toads who croak when the swim is done. This quiet spot is my muse. While I swim, my mind rests and listens to the ideas forming. After I dry off, I stretch out with my notebook and jot it all down.

What has been the biggest achievement of your career so far?

I write about tough historic situations and tortured characters like slaves, fatherless immigrants, Natives, and disadvantaged inner city children. And my readers don't flinch or turn away. In fact, young readers rise up with such empathy and compassion for those who have suffered; they have a strong sense of injustice to match my own. I am so grateful to have interested readers like this. It makes me hopeful that my readers will grow into sensitive, tolerant adults.

As a writer, can you describe the pivotal moment when you discover your character's voice - in this case, when you found Solomon?

When my characters show up, the real writing begins. Until that happens, I research, take notes, plan, decide on setting, dates etc. I need to feel that my characters are real, and "tell" me their story; I don't want to put words in their mouth but instead, I want to hear them speak. The book begins with them. I knew that I wanted to write a novel about the Canadian experience of the fugitive slaves and I had

lots of notes but no idea where to begin or who my main character would be. Over a few months, ideas came and went as I walked and gardened. Then, one hot August afternoon, as I was swimming, I pictured a young boy's face clearly - his almond eyes, big ears and smooth skin, "tupelo honey brown". This boy had been in my mind all week but he was silent. As I stepped out of the pond, his voice began to speak. The first thing he told me was about his grandpa and how he lost him. Then he spoke about his meeting with Old Ezekiel, "the keeper of the stories", who could not write but recorded everything in his heart. The whole scene appeared as vividly in my mind as if I watched a movie. It was *real*. If a story came to you like that, wouldn't you write it down? That's exactly what I did. I grabbed my pencil and wrote it down as fast as I could. The next morning, I began work on the book, Crossing to Freedom, trusting that my companion, now named Solomon, would lead the way.

All my novels begin like this - visual, surprising, sudden. My job is to show up, get the words down, don't judge, and just write. Now it's your turn to write! Get your pencil ready!