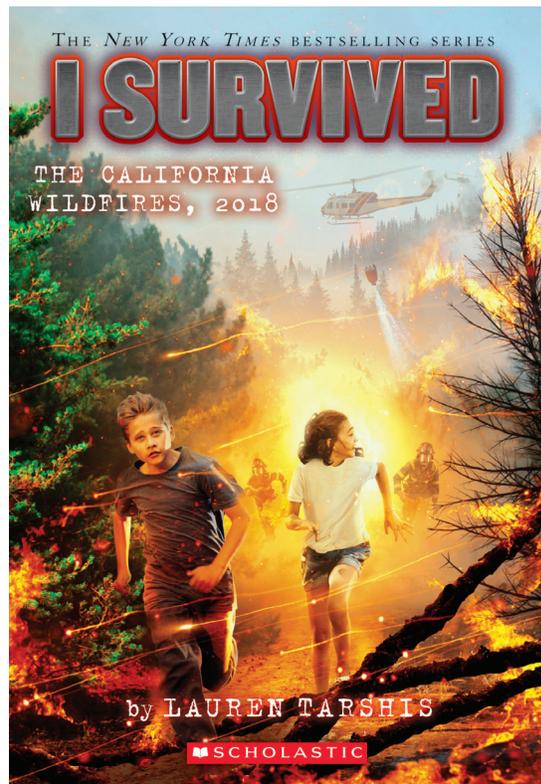


# Q&A: Lauren Tarshis, Author of the ‘I Survived’ Series



Elise Dumpleton · Writers' Corner · September 4, 2020 · 6 min read

*I SURVIVED: The California Wildfires, 2018* is the landmark twentieth installment in this beloved and adventurous series! It tells the heart pounding story of two children who battle the terrifying flames and – despite the destruction – find hope in the ashes.

The *I SURVIVED* series has over 30 million copies in print! This historical fiction series tells the stories of iconic historical events—from the Revolutionary War to the sinking of the Titanic to the September 11 terrorist attacks—through the eyes of a fictional child whom

young readers can relate to.

We had the pleasure of chatting to Lauren about her latest release, advice for aspiring writers, book recommendations, and more.

## Hi, Lauren! Tell us a bit about yourself!

I'm an author and editor and I oversee the classroom magazine division at Scholastic, where I've worked for many years with many wonderful people. My husband and I have four kids, and we live in the

Connecticut town where I grew up.

I learned recently that I need way more interesting hobbies for purposes of interviews like this. A dad once wrote to me with his son for an Eagle Scout project, and he asked me what I do when I'm not working. So I wrote about how I love to cook and hike and embroider.

The dad wrote back, "Do you have any more exciting hobbies?"

### **When did you first discover your love for writing?**

I was not a reader as a kid – I really struggled. So the idea of being an author seemed completely out of reach. At the same time, my dad was a freelance writer. So I understood exactly what it meant. It wasn't the best way to earn a living (thank goodness my mom was a teacher). But my dad loved what he did. He wrote nonfiction, articles for magazines like *Tennis*, *Seventeen*, and *Town and Country*. He specialized in travel and sports.

I've come to understand I've combined the work of both of my parents — writing and teaching. I enjoy telling stories. But I also want my stories to build kids' knowledge and spark their curiosity. And I love my relationships with teachers and being a part of classrooms. That's what really inspires me.

### ***I SURVIVED: The California Wildfires, 2018* is out now!**

#### **What can readers expect?**

Like all of my books, my goal was to tell the story of an important event through the eyes of a fictional child — in this case two kids named Josh and Holly — who lived through it. I wanted it to feel authentic — the fear, the loss, the uncertainty — but the theme is resilience. I always want my characters to model mindsets and personal connections that enable them to come through difficult events and, eventually, to heal and move forward. I want the books to be realistic but extremely hopeful. I also want to pack in tons of information.

For this book, I wanted kids to understand what causes monster wildfires that burn hundreds of thousands of acres and why wildfires are becoming so much bigger and hotter and more destructive. I wanted to give them a sense of the beauty of these wild places, and why we must work together to try to protect them. And of course my goal is to also write an exciting and suspenseful story that will grab even reluctant and struggling readers.

### **With 20 books now in the *I SURVIVED* series, how did the series come to be?**

In my work for Scholastic magazines, I learned that kids are way more interested in learning about an event or time in history if there is a kid at the center of a story. As I was raising my kids — three sons and a daughter — I noticed there were few narrative history books for young kids. Amazing authors like Deborah Hopkinson and Russell Friedman were writing for older middle-grade and middle-school kids. But not so much for younger kids and struggling readers. I had the idea to write a series that would fill that gap.

### **What does your research process for each of the *I SURVIVED* look like?**

I have travelled to almost every place I've written about, and that is generally the most important part of my research. I want to walk in the footsteps of my characters and talk to people who have deep connections to a place or event, whether it's descendants of people who survived the children's blizzard of 1888 or people from the lower ninth ward of New Orleans, who lived through Katrina.

In addition, I read exhaustively to not only understand the event, but the time period or the science behind it. I interview experts — scientists, historians. I always learn far more about my topics than makes it into my books. But without all the research, I would not find the small details that make topics more fascinating to my readers, the little details

that makes them stop and smile or that they want to share with their friends.

**The *I SURVIVED* series has also recently expanded into graphic novels. What has it been like adapting these books into this format and what do you think the new visual elements add to the stories?**

I've am so enjoying the experience of seeing my books come to life in this new format and made accessible to more readers. The Scholastic team has done a beautiful job, especially my editor Katie Woehr, who makes sure every detail is right as the stories are translated. Georgia Ball has adapted all of my stories for the novels, and I'm amazed how she captures the heart of my characters and the essence of the stories.

**Many teachers and parents credit the *I SURVIVED* series for helping turn reluctant readers into avid bookworms. What is it about this series that you think children are so drawn to?**

The topics are certainly high interest. Kids want the suspense and as many nitty-gritty details as possible. But what I hear most is that it's the characters that draw the kids in. And that's definitely the hardest part of writing the series, is creating the characters that have heart, that my readers will really care about and get attached to.

I think that kids need frameworks to understand our uncertain world, and gravitate towards characters who they can connect to, who are struggling in some way — and then overcome their struggles. I think kids, even kids don't say they don't love to read, are eager to discover new worlds and "meet" people that inspire them in surprising ways.

**What piece of advice would you give to aspiring writers?**

When I was in fourth grade, an author came to visit our school. She began her presentation by telling us that she always knew she would become an author

because — and I can picture her right now saying this — by the age five she realized she had a "gift."

I remember thinking to myself, "a gift? You're supposed to have a gift?" Because I knew I had no gift, for anything, let alone writing. It was extremely dispiriting (and I never forgot it!)

I know many authors and artists do have natural gifts. I don't. I have no "talent" for writing. Writing is, I believe, a skill that is learned through lots of practice, like playing a sport or cooking or playing Mine Craft. Making mistakes is part of learning. I have learned not to get frustrated when I spend days and days writing chapters that are boring or confusing or ridiculous, when I have to start again from scratch. Writing these "bad" chapters is part of the learning journey. With each book, I try to get better. So my advice for aspiring authors is to write, get feedback, and feel proud of everything you write because it is helping you get better.

**With the current state of the world, what are you doing to cope with the changes we've had to make with our day-to-day?**

I'm spending as much time connected to my family and friends as possible. I'm lucky to have work that I love, and a huge network of teachers, parents, kids — and people like you all! — who make me feel inspired, who give my work meaning.

**What's next for you?**

More *I Survived* books, and a new wild adventure series that I'm just beginning.

**Lastly, what are you currently reading and do you have any book recommendations for our readers?**

My latest read was *Stamped*, which I loved, and I listened to Jason Reynolds reading it, which was wonderful. I'm in the middle of *The Canyon's Edge*, which comes out next week, by Dusti Bowling. I love it!