



A Conversation with Lauren Tarshis, Westport Author of “I Survived” Series for Young Readers

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Recently, I went on a re-reading binge of my favorite childhood novels that began when my son brought home “The Westing Game,” which he was reading in his English class and which was a beloved book from my youth. What most surprised me was how vividly these books still live in my imagination, how vividly I remember the characters and plots, almost as if I lived with and through them myself.

This provides, for me, further evidence of literature’s tremendous power to shape our beliefs and experiences. As a mother, this moves me to read and think about the books my son reads and the worlds he enters imaginatively through them. It’s not that I wish to enclose him in a bubble where nothing bad ever happens, but I do want him to find, through

empathetic identification with characters and events, a way to understand tragedy and to understand that it’s possible to move forward and find hope.

One writer for children who does exactly this, and whose books my 11-year old son and I both loved, is Lauren Tarshis of Westport. Her “I Survived” series, paperback novels of roughly 100 pages each, tell the stories of moments of national crisis from the perspective of children living through them. Each is gripping, honest, and provides lessons in resilience and hope for young readers.

A mother of four, Tarshis, who is working on her 7th novel in the series about the Battle of Gettysburg, was kind enough to answer my questions about, among

others, where she found her inspiration for the series, her writing process, and why kids love to read about disasters (they really do!).

SA: *As the mother of an 11-year old, my first thought upon seeing the series was gratitude because I can see that my son, like many children his age and even younger, is curious about disasters, destruction, tragedy and has been for some years. But I have struggled to find a way to talk about them with him, and I appreciate that the books address what I'd call iconic or defining national tragedies.*

The medium of fiction allows for a kind of identification between subject and reader that differs qualitatively from nonfiction (I'm thinking, also, of a recent study that showed reading novels promotes empathy). Can you speak to the decision to write fictional accounts (vs. nonfiction for kids)? And also (my son asked me to ask these), how did you first become interested in writing about disasters, and how did you decide which ones to write about?

LT: My first two novels, "Emma-Jean Lazarus Fell Out of a Tree" and "Emma-Jean Lazarus Fell in Love," were 'quiet' middle grade novels for girls published by Dial Books for Young Readers (Penguin). I was all set to continue on this pleasant path.

But at the same time that I was learning to write novels, I was working at Scholastic, where I still work, creating very delightful magazines and digital products used by teachers to teach reading and language arts skills. For years, my main job was creating Storyworks, a magazine for kids in grades 3-6, which features nonfiction, fiction, plays, and poetry.

By far the most successful articles in the magazine were (and still are) the narrative nonfiction stories I wrote about disasters and other "high-impact" events—battles, the dust bowl, adventures gone awry. Kids

loved these stories, and teachers did too, because they gripped even the reluctant readers. And I noticed something interesting, which is that when the kids wrote to me, they didn't ask about the disasters—the flood or the volcano or the avalanche. They asked about the boy or the girl in the story. That is what fascinated them, the human element.

So as I was planning on writing my third middle grade novel for girls, I suddenly had the idea for "I Survived." It struck me that there really were no books about these events that were narrative in form and that would enable kids to connect with characters and view the events through the eyes of a child like them. I wrote the proposal very quickly, and Scholastic was the natural choice as publisher given their amazing connection in schools. I always pictured the books in classrooms.

The decision to make them historical fiction was based on exactly the point you raised—that I wanted kids to connect emotionally with the characters. While I often discover real kids in my research, I couldn't count on always finding a historical character who I could build a rich story around (without taking too many liberties). Historical fiction seemed that way to go. The only downside to this is that the books are incredibly challenging and time consuming to write. I face all of the challenges of writing fiction—creating compelling characters and plots-- and then have to interweave the characters' inner journeys with the often inflexible historical plot. I write many, many drafts of each book before I give them to my editor and do enormous amounts of research for each title.

The Scholastic team has led me towards the topics that they believe will resonate most with kids, and that are most requested by teachers. When I first conceived of the series, I thought I would write about lesser-known disasters, but the Scholastic team—correctly—felt I

should focus on the “iconic” events. I just finished “I Survived 7,” about the Battle of Gettysburg.

SA: *What I love about the books is that they really focus on how the child, from whose perspective the story is told, perceives the events around him in a way that feels very genuine to how children process and experience. The narrative voice doesn't talk down to children or try to soften the tragedies, but at the same time, they're not overly scary. There's almost a kind of matter-of-factness about it, with the outcome being that we figure things out in the process.*

I'm curious to know how you managed that! Did your research process include child psychology, or were you working from your own observations of children?

LT: First of all, I thank you for your kind words, and am really thrilled that you feel this way about my work. One of the huge challenges of this series is making the stories realistic and honest, but that don't carelessly fling open doors in children's imaginations that lead them to the depths of horror and evil that we can find when reading about history.

In my job at Scholastic, I have been writing for kids for 23 years. I have visited so many classrooms. I have benefited from the wisdom of colleagues who are gifted writers and editors. I also have my own four children, whose sorrows and joys I connect with (probably too much) like all parents do. And I also have my memories of my own childhood mindset. I was overly sensitive as a kid, and every fear and insecurity I felt is still etched into my mind (a bit sad!). So in addition to observations of children that I have made as an adult, I remember myself, and how I processed emotions like fear and sadness.

SA: *I'm curious about the narrative structure. Each of the books begins at a climactic moment then goes backward*

in time to lead up to the moment where the story began, which also builds in suspense. This certainly hooked my son (who devoured the whole series in one weekend—the only time I've seen him read this obsessively was with Harry Potter). Can you speak to how you developed this structure and why?

LT: For this I owe the wisdom of an 11 year old, my son's friend Ben Kanter. I had written the first draft of the Titanic book, and I asked if I could read it to him. In that draft, I started the story at the beginning of the voyage, on the ship, with my character George enjoying the sights and wonders. I could see Ben smiling politely, and then he said, “Is there any way to start with the action?” And of course that's what I needed to do!

This became the structure of all of the books. I actually write that first chapter at the very end of the writing process, to provide a concentrated version of the book's climactic scene plus details that will help ground the readers in the time and place.

SA: *When I ask my son what he finds so compelling about national disasters like the Titanic or Pearl Harbor and what he wants to understand about them, he gives me the equivalent of “I dunno.” What is your sense of why children are so intrigued by disaster?*

From what I have observed, I suspect it's curiosity that exists outside of fear or even judgment and that is driven by a children's genuine desire to understand something about how they would react in the face of catastrophe (whether or not they can articulate that). How we react in a life-or-death situation shows us what we're made of and what we can expect from ourselves.

To what extent could this preoccupation with disaster be a manifestation of kids wanting to know more about themselves in the world, especially outside the protective circle of family, etc.? What have you heard from kids

themselves about what they love about these books?

LT: That's such an interesting question, and I'm not sure I have a definitive answer, though I love your analysis—that curiosity about these events is a step towards kids learning to confront the world outside of their family. I was born the day after JFK was shot, and from the earliest age I was just completely fascinated by that disaster. It seemed like “my” event, and I identified with it, though of course I was too young to experience the reverberations.

I was a terrible reader as a child—I really didn't read books until high school. And the earliest books I loved were about historical events and disasters. I do think some of us (me) propel ourselves into these scenarios and imagine how we would do, if we would have the mettle to rescue others, to overcome fear and hardship. My books really are about resilience, about kids discovering inner resources they didn't know they had, family connections they didn't understand fully, the importance of hope and optimism in life.

I have received thousands of emails and letters from readers over the past 2 years since the series began, and I think mostly the kids love the combination of action and emotion. They do connect with these characters and they enjoy being pulled into the vortex. I work hard to keep the action very fast-paced, to write short chapters. My most prized emails come from parents, and many have told me that the series is the first their kids have connected with. I work hard to give the stories depth and richness, but to make sure that every aspect of the stories, including the often complex historical dynamics (as in Pearl Harbor or 9/11) are comprehensible to kids who might struggle with reading.

SA: *Speaking of 9/11, I found “I Survived the Attacks of*

Sept. 11” very moving. I was actually surprised at how much it affected me. On the one hand, I’m a native New Yorker, and I was commuting from Westport to NYU in the months and years before and after. I was also a new mother going back to graduate school after summer break, so it really colored my experiences as a new mom with a life beyond motherhood that I value.

On the other hand, I have not been able to read any fiction or see films that fictionalize 9/11, yet that barrier dissolved reading your book. Maybe this is because it is written for young readers and so gives me a way to talk about it with my son, which is so difficult and painful (especially since my parents still live in Manhattan).

How did the main characters, point of view, and setting in a firehouse come to you? What kind of research did you do for this book? Given your personal connection to the event, to what extent was the research and writing process different than for previous books in the series?

LT: I was extremely anxious about taking on 9/11, for every reason you cite. I did more research for this book than any of the others and also wrote more drafts. It took months to come up with a backstory for Lucas and his family, though I sensed from the start that it should be a firefighter's story. All of the “I Survived” books have two distinct plot lines—the story of the disaster but also a sub plot that involves the inner life of the boy. The challenge for me is finding a way for these plots to intersect. It's not enough to have the characters just tossed into the disaster and tossed out. Somehow what these characters experience in the historical event helps them resolve some internal struggle they are experiencing.

Sometimes I'll write full drafts of these books and then decide that this interweaving failed, and I need to start again. This happened over and over again with

the 9/11 book. Much failure! In the end, I delved more deeply into the stories of firefighters, not only 9/11 firefighters but others who had been involved in tragic fires all over the country.

There are several books about these events, and reading them helped me better understand the impact that a firefighter's work has on their entire family. The understanding I gained from these books, which I read after reading and watching probably everything available about 9/11, enabled me to slowly build the story of Lucas and his father, and then the story of Lucas and Benny, and then back to Lucas and his father, which is the heart of the book

SA: *One of my favorite parts of each book is the 'author's letter' at the end—directly addressing young readers, providing facts, directing them to further reading or, in the case of "I Survived the Attacks of Sept. 11," providing your own connection to the event and then a timeline. Was this something that you expressly wanted to do? What does writing this part mean to you?*

LT: My favorite part of being a writer for kids—and the most unexpected part—is the opportunity I have to connect directly with readers. I have done many, many school visits around the country, and personally answer every email I receive. The 'author's letter' is my chance to communicate more personally with readers I don't get to meet, to give the kids insights into what I personally gained from writing the book, the challenges I experienced, and any connection I might have to the event.

I wasn't sure how kids would feel about my author's letters, or if they would even read them. But by the time I finish writing each book, I feel so emotionally invested in the topic. The characters seem like real people to me. I am thinking about them all the time, dreaming about them, worrying about them. The

only person who knows the full extent of this is my husband, who is so supportive, and makes it possible for me to take the time away from family and the household to do this work, who listens endlessly as I talk about the characters and my struggles. I really don't discuss the books with anyone else while I'm in the depths of the writing process.

But when I'm finished, I want the readers to know how much of myself I put into these little paperback books. I want to pull readers' close and say, "You wouldn't believe what I learned writing this! It was so hard! And so sad! I hope you like it!"

SA: *And finally, an easy question! What is your connection to Westport?*

LT: My family moved to Westport when I was 11 and lived here until college. My husband and I moved here 15 years ago, when our oldest was in third grade. My parents are here, as is my brother and his family.

I love being in a place where I have such deep roots, where we know three generations worth of friends—friends I played with in elementary school, my parents' friends, people we've met through our kids, who range in age from 8 to 22.

Interestingly, I still sometimes go to many places where I don't know a soul. But there are other times when I feel as though I am literally surrounded by my history. People say the town has changed so much over the decades. But in many ways it's much the same, with our beautiful beach, our library, the dynamic high school, and Westport Pizzeria, where my friends and I used to go when we were 11 for a slice and a grape soda.