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To Write About Older Men, Maine Children's Author Lois Lowry Says She Imagined She Was One

By [NORA FLAHERTY \(/PEOPLE/NORA-FLAHERTY\)](#) · AUG 9, 2017



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Lois Lowry in 2014.

TRISTAN LOPER / FLICKR/CREATIVE COMMONS

Lois Lowry has written more than 40 books for kids and young adults, won a bevy of awards for her work and had one of her books, “The Giver,” made into a 2014 film starring Jeff Bridges and Meryl Streep.

She’s now 80, and her latest piece is a contribution to unique collection in which authors use paintings by the Maine artist Linden Frederick as writing prompts — pieces painted specifically as for the collection, called “Night Stories.” The writers include Lowry, Richard Russo, Anthony Doerr, Elizabeth Strout, Lily King and Tess Gerritsen.

The book comes out in October and is very much for grownups. But ahead of an appearance at a fundraiser for Camp Susan Curtis, she had writing for younger people on her mind. She spoke with Nora Flaherty, who asked her about her reputation for getting inside kids’ heads.

Lois Lowry: That seems to be something I can do because I have a gift for memory. Some people say they can recall events from their childhood, but they say it’s like watching a movie or a video. For me, I can re-experience my thoughts and my feelings, and remember the colors and sounds of things, and the smell of my grandmother’s roses when I was four years old — it all comes flooding back.

So when I move into that space, although I’m usually using a fictional character, I put myself in the mind and heart of a child. And that’s how I start out each time.

Nora Flaherty: You’ve been writing for decades in kids’ voices. Has the way you think about this changed over the years?

Lowry: What I think what has changed is the children reading my books. Not their interior life, not their heart and soul, but their daily life, the fact that they’re connected to electronics, which didn’t exist when I was a child, or even when I began writing for children.

So there’s less of the long, patient, curled up in a chair time that I enjoyed in my childhood with a book. Kids don’t do that so much anymore, usually. For the most part kids’ attention spans are shorter, because of the electronic world they live in. And as a writer for kids, have to be aware of that. I have to make my books move along more quickly, because I know the child reader is not going to have the patience I did when I was eight or 10 years old.

Flaherty: Your most recent work is about much older people, who you’ve described on your blog (http://www.loislowry.com/index.php?option=com_easyblog&view=entry&id=711&Itemid=194) as “men in a small Maine coastal town...men past their prime, men who have regrets, men who don’t articulate feelings.” How did you get into those minds?

Lowry: The process of writing fiction is always the process of creating the character, and then entering their mind, and their soul. I have been a child — I can do that with a child, easily. But I have never been a man, I’ve never been a 60-year-old man on the coast of Maine, but I can imagine it.

I had complete latitude for what I should write. I could have created a story about a woman. But when I looked at the picture that was to be the trigger for the story, it was men who came to mind – men of a certain age and a certain mindset – and so I had to let my imagination go there and enter the feelings, minds and hearts of those men.

Flaherty: Can you describe the story you did write?

Lowry: The painting the story was to be based on was kind of mysterious. My mind went toward a group of men, in a small fictional town somewhere on the coast of Maine, and the fact that they were all past their prime, things were falling apart for them in various ways and that they had regrets. But there was also a humorous quality to it.

And there they are, these five men in a small town who are lamenting, I think, the things that they've lost.

Flaherty: There is a real sadness to it. What feels different about writing about older people versus writing about something for a younger audience, where there's a certain hope because there's so much time ahead?

Lowry: Well, both kinds of stories are going to incorporate sadness as well as joy – that's what life consists of, and you don't experience one without the other.

But writing about men who have grown older, they no longer have the feeling that kids are privileged to have, that everything is still ahead, that they can make the world better, that they can change things.

By the time you're my age, and I've just turned 80, I no longer think that, but I do still hope for it for children, for those who are growing up, that they'll have that experience.

Flaherty: You'll be appearing on Aug. 11, at an event for Camp Susan Curtis, and you'll be doing a reading. Any idea what you'll be reading?

Lowry: I have not been told what to read from, and that makes it harder.

When you go see someone, you like to hear the things you know. So do people want to hear from me a passage from a book they know well, like "The Giver" or "Number the Stars"? Do people want to hear a piece of that again, although they've heard it many times? Or do they want to hear something brand new, which for me might be more fun?



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"50 Percent" by Linden Frederick, used by Lois Lowry as a writing prompt.

One thing I've thought about reading is something from one of the Anastasia books (http://www.loislowry.com/index.php?option=com_djcatalog2&view=items&cid=1%3Athe-anastasia-series&Itemid=185). Those are about a family in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who are a smart, funny, intact and very loving family. So that may be where I go. I haven't decided yet.

Flaherty: When I was growing up, Anastasia's family, the Krupniks, were very familiar because I grew up near Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the books take place. Were they inspired by anyone in particular? Because they weren't typical of kids in kids' books at the time.

Lowry: I think they were typical of a certain kind of family you'd see in Cambridge, which is a unique place. I think they're the kind of family that still exists, and if you're not in that kind of family you want to be.

And I can't tell you how many times over the years, how many times I've heard from kids who would like to join the Krupnik family and be a sibling to Anastasia.

 Listen
13:38

Nora Flaherty's full interview with Lois Lowry

Lois Lowry will appear at a benefit on Aug. 11 for the Susan L. Curtis Foundation. "Night Stories" comes out in November. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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