

E-Interview: Norma Fox Mazer

with Ann Angel

Norma Fox Mazer says that, from the time she taught herself to read at four, she has been enthralled with words and stories. At thirteen, the idea of becoming a writer “seized” her. Marrying another would-be writer, Harry Mazer, whom eventually authored three books with Norma, certainly helped ensure that she would achieve her long held dream.

Still, it’s amazing to hear Norma tell of how she and Harry, whom she married when she was 18 years old, became fulltime writers. A young couple raising four children under the age of ten, with only enough savings to last them three months, they simply decided at a certain point that it was now or never. They took the plunge to become fulltime writers. For eight years, seven days a week, the Mazers supported their children and honed their skills by writing pulp fiction. Both Norma and Harry turned to novel writing, which they had dreamed of doing, after an agent told them that the children’s market was “hungry.” Since then, Norma has published thirty books, including *After The Rain*, a Newbery Honor Book, *Taking Teri Mueller*, winner of the Edgar Award for Best Juvenile Mystery, *Dear Bill*, *Remember Me*, which won a Christopher Award, and *A Figure of Speech*, a National Book Award nominee. Many more of her novels have won other awards, including ALA Best Book for Young Adult awards.

In Don Gallo’s *Authors’ Insights: Turning Teenagers into Readers & Writers*, Norma, using a swimming metaphor, once described what she hopes to achieve with her writing: “I want my reader to fall into what I’ve written like falling into water, to go down and down and down, to enter that underwater universe, to be transformed, to breathe like a sea creature, effortlessly slipping and sliding and swimming, a fish among fish.” Readers have learned to expect this type of careful metaphor from Norma, who often relies on developing symbolic meaning in her work by drawing on details of setting, much like a screenwriter would rely upon well-placed props.

In addition to her writing, Norma, who lives with Harry in New York, is a member of the Vermont College faculty where she currently chairs the MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults program. Following is a conversation that we engaged in over email:

AA: You have a reputation for writing realistic novels that talk about important issues. These have included sexual abuse, death, war, poverty and physical abuse at the hands of an older sister. What motivates you to write about those topics?

NFM: I’m drawn to stories for different reasons, but rarely for the “topic.” I want to write about individuals, people at a point of change or in some kind of crisis, and how they manage, the choices they make, the blunders and mistakes that go along with being young, but mostly with being human. The stories that I’ve written have all come to me in different ways. I never intended to write about the Holocaust, for instance, although I had read a great deal about it for years. Then, I was asked if I knew the WWII history of Oswego, NY. No, I didn’t, although I’d lived rather close by that town for years. My ignorance of this history, plus Oswego’s resemblance to the town where my maternal grandparents had settled and where I grew up [Glens Falls, New York] piqued my interest. The result was *Goodnight, Maman*. A letter from a friend about a pajama party her daughter had attended started me writing *Silver*. The seeds of stories have come from memories, dreams, newspapers, chance conversations, but never from a desire to write about an “important issue.”

AA: When you get ideas for stories, what comes to you first, a voice, a character, a plot problem?

NFM: I never know what’s going to trigger a story or what will come to me first. The imagination is a mysterious thing: it sometimes seems to have a life of its own. I have learned to trust that something that catches my attention does so for a reason, even if I don’t know the reason at the moment. A sentence overheard on a street in New York City started an imaginative sequence which will probably end up as a short story. A memory from childhood or a dream from last night can end as a layer of a story, a detail, or the focus of the story, the heart of it, the core. A story I want to write began with a newspaper photo of a young girl standing on the steps of a courthouse. I saw that photo in the Syracuse newspapers perhaps five years ago and couldn’t forget it.

Another way to answer this question is to say that, for me, voice, character and structure in the novel are so intricately woven together that one hardly exists without the others.

AA: Are you a writer who relies upon character sketches and story outlines to develop your characters, or do you write to find out how the story ends?

NFM: I don’t have a rigid method for writing a novel. When I was new to the craft and very anxious, I did labor over outlines, but in time I learned to trust myself, and I never outline now. I do ask myself many, many, many questions

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and continue to do that throughout the writing: questions about where the character is going [literally, psychologically and emotionally], what she wants, how she's going to get it, and what stands in her way. These are basic plot or story questions, and they intersect so closely with character and event, are so entwined, that I can hardly consider any one without the others.

A novel is so much a process for me, a kind of layering in of all the elements and goes on through so many revisions, that it would be total hubris for me to suggest I know very much before I begin. I think about the story as much as I'm able to before the actual writing, but I rarely know the full dimensions of what I'm doing until I've put down that first rough draft—or even the second or third draft. Sometimes, early on, scenes, narrative bits, and pieces of dialogue come to me, and I consider these as gifts.

AA: You've said that, to get through a first written draft, you sit at your computer with a fedora that you wear pulled down over your eyes. Could you describe how the inability to see the words on the page helps you through this process?

NFM: Well, this habit developed because I'm the sort of person who needs order in my world. [When our house was full of kids, to find time for writing I had to learn to put bed making and dish washing low on the must-do list, and I could do it only because the writing meant so much to me.] I need and crave order and neatness, but writing a first draft is a messy, messy process, literally and figuratively. My aim is to get down what's in my mind, the scenes I see there, the words I hear. I want my imagination to have free rein, to go wherever it leads me, and I want to do this without doubting and questioning myself. [What? You're going to write that? Are you crazy!] I type as fast as I can—no stopping, no questioning, no thinking, just getting the story down, however roughly. Writing this way, I inevitably misspell words, punctuate either not at all or badly, and in general make a mess of the page. If I see this mess, I know I'll feel compelled to stop and clean it up, and doing that will turn off the creative part of my mind, send me right out of my story. Does that make sense to you? That I cover my eyes, to avoid seeing the mess and to keep my focus in on my imagination? Anyway, it works for me.

After writing about five pages as rapidly as possible, without seeing anything I've written, I let myself go back and clean up the mess, do the spelling and punctuation and so on. That's satisfying not just because I [obviously, I guess] like making order out of a mess, but because in making that order, what almost always happens is that I begin at once to rewrite, re-imagine, expand on and refine those rough pages. Gradually, too, as I work this way my intentions for the story, the things I've sensed but not yet articulated, start to become clearer to me.

So that's the way I go—hat on, eyes covered, rapid typing, another mess, clean it up, and so on I go until I get to the end of what I call a first draft. By then, though, I've written everything over at least two or three times—and now the real work and the real delight begins. Revisions.

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AA: When working with student writers, you've said, "Readers want to feel they're inside a character, that they're living the story with her." You succeed in co-mingling the world of the reader and main character from the first pages in *Girlhearts* when Sarabeth Silver and her mother stand together beneath a rain cloud at the point that separates rain from dryness. We're right there with Sarabeth when she learns her mother has become ill, and then again, when her mother dies. There isn't a moment when the reader moves outside of Sarabeth's world. What elements do you look for during revision to ensure this reader experience?

NFM: I'm not quite sure how to answer this question. There's no formula or secret here. I try to live inside the character while I'm writing the story, which for me means to be truthful to the character's experience and not impose my own thoughts or desires, which, in turn, means that I am receptive to surprises, and that I do not manipulate the character or events to achieve a pre-conceived idea. And I should add that it means, also, a lot of work—that is, rewriting and revising.

AA: Do you often achieve this reader/character experience on a first draft?

NFM: Would that I could! I did get pretty close to the characters in both *Out of Control* and *After the Rain* on the first drafts. But those stories had fairly long incubation periods, which probably helped. Most often, it takes work, which is just another word for process. It's work that I love, but it is work. It's writing and revising and rewriting and writing again and going through the manuscript time after time. In the case of *Girlhearts*, I wrote what I thought of as the opening chapters at least 15 times, each time attacking the story from another angle, and I was stuck there in those 25 or so pages for a very long time. Finally, I realized what I had to do to break out, after which I wrote the first chapter that's in the book now. As soon as I wrote those pages, I had what I needed for the story to go forward, and I was able to get on to the end of the draft.

AA: What specific technical challenges does writing to make the reader experience the character's story present in your own writing process?

NFM: The only way I can answer that is to say that, for me, I must somehow enter the spirit of the character. I know that sounds mysterious and mystical, and maybe it is. I don't have any secrets to pass on as to how to do this. I had to learn how to break through a certain place in myself, that place where you take the easy route. For some reason, which may not make too much metaphoric sense, I envision it as breaking through ice. [And then what—drowning? No, swimming.]

Let me try again—the ability to make a character live on the page results not only from the real work of writing, but arises from freeing the imagination, from allowing the spirit of the character you're creating to inhabit you. I think I said before that I wanted to inhabit the character, but the character must also live in the writer. To put it more practically, it's a matter of getting to know the character thoroughly, so well, in fact [which happens as I go through draft after draft] that

if I didn't feel like a fool saying it, I'd say that eventually, I'm channeling the character's voice, mind and spirit. At the same time, I should say that of course the writer is also always *there*, present somewhere in the character of the character.

AA: You've said that there are rare cases in which "pure" voice occurs, where the character's internal and external voices are so "in-the-moment" and close that there is no difference in language and time. It's the point when the experience unfolds before the reader as though the main character is telling it and understanding the story's significance for the first time. Can you explain how this purity of voice and viewpoint occurs and why writers strive for this?

NFM: I don't know if every writer strives for purity of voice, although it's one of my goals, nor do I know how to explain how this purity happens, other than what I've already said. I'll try to say it a bit differently. Writing a story, whether a short story or a novel, is an intricate balance of character, event, and voice. A good story is a product of the imagination, which must be allowed the freedom to find images to convey the events of the story, and words to express those images—images, which, in the best of all possible fictional words, are not contrived or hackneyed. I doubt this really makes anything clearer! I don't do well with generalizations.

AA: You captured purity of voice in *When She Was Good*, giving readers an intimate and immediate view of Em's isolation and yearning to connect with people in her community. Can you give examples of one or two other novels that accomplish this purity?

NFM: The two examples that spring immediately to mind are Carolyn Coman's *Many Stones* and Brock Cole's *The Facts Speak for Themselves*. When I read each of those novels, I was struck by the voice of the character as "pure" in the sense that I heard only the character and was never aware of the author's voice directing or intruding. Both novels delivered the experiences of the characters within the worlds they inhabited in a direct, true way without anything artificial or forced. I think of both novels as exemplary and wonderful achievements.

AA: You've said it is important that, when readers finish the last page of a book, the story stays with them, the emotions of the story resonate in their minds. That's exactly what happens with many of your stories. Long after readers finish reading *When She Was Good*, they worry about Em and if she's managed to move more completely away from her isolation. With Sarabeth, in *Girlhearts*, readers finish the book and imagine what it would be to form a family of the bits and pieces left if they'd lost the last real family member in their lives. When you're working with your novels, how, and at what point, do you judge if you've created an ending that's an easy out or one that resonates?

NFM: All along the way I'm working for the ending, thinking about it, trying to understand what I'm doing below the surface of the story. I don't usually know even the parameters of the plot when I begin—that is what, specifically, is going to happen to the characters, how the events of the story will affect them and their decisions. I do, however, usually

have a general idea of where the story is going—that is, the direction or trajectory of events, but I learn as I write how things will actually play out. At some point in the process, sometimes when I'm in despair, sometimes only when I'm fairly sure I've got a grip on the story, I read it out loud to my husband. Occasionally there's the added presence of one of my daughters and/or one of my sisters. For some reason, an out loud reading is a kind of acid test of the story for me. I can tell when it's going off the track, when something is false or uninteresting. It becomes actually painful for me to read a section that I am recognizing as incomplete or failing—and that's the best evidence I have that I haven't yet finished my work.

AA: In *From Romance to Realism: Fifty Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*, Michael Cart says that the young adult novel must be "unsparingly honest, even brutally candid, if necessary, both in the choice of subjects it risks addressing and in the openness with which it treats the material." You've written candidly about abuse, poverty and death. In doing so, you've most often written about the extraordinary turning points in ordinary lives. Was this a purposeful goal in your own work?

NFM: When I began writing seriously, I wasn't very purposeful about anything except my desire to write and tell stories. After a while, I realized that I *was* writing mostly about "ordinary" people going through various crises. Part of that was simply attention to what makes a story interesting and even, one hopes, riveting. [Happy, satisfied characters tend to be boring in books, if not in life.] I suppose the characters I feel at ease with and write about reflect something about my own life and background, my sense of my parents and aunts and uncles as people who worked hard and struggled to make their lives good and worthwhile. They were "ordinary," but not dull!

AA: You've mentioned in a number of interviews that you and your husband, Harry, have

written at least three novels together. You've also mentioned that you let Harry read and critique your work. Could you describe the give and take of the critique process between you and Harry?

NFM: I don't "let" Harry read and critique, I *require* that he does it. I need him, his not-easily-satisfied eye. We've worked closely together for many years and long ago agreed we had to be honest with each other about our writing, or what was the point. We sometimes discuss our stories before writing, but not always. We do, however, always read one another's drafts. I trust him to read work that I wouldn't have the courage to give anyone else—too raw, too messy.

Once he's read the draft, we sit down and talk about the story, what I've done, where I'm going, what works, and what's it all mean, anyway? I always want to know if the story is working on the basic storytelling level and if the characters are convincing. Is the writing fresh? Are there surprises for the reader that are believable? What doesn't work, where'd I get lost or lose the reader?

It's not an easy thing to subject my work to this kind of scrutiny, but if we skipped this, I'd have to put the draft away

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for months before I could look at it objectively and try to figure out what I needed to do and where I needed to go.

AA: How do you handle those moments when Harry tells you that something needs more work?

NFM: So often, there's a kind of *click* of recognition when he points out something, then a little chagrin that I didn't get it myself, but at the same time relief that I'm getting it now, all mixed in with eagerness to get back to work on the story. And of course I go through this all over again with my editors when they read the manuscript. In short, I'm nothing but grateful for the input.

AA: In addition to writing novels, you've written many short stories. Which genre do you enjoy most and why?

NFM: Impossible to choose. I love writing novels, creating a world and then living in that world for a year or sometimes longer. I also love the satisfaction of writing a story in a month or six weeks, seeing it done.

AA: Which writers do you read in order to learn more about techniques and craft in your own writing?

NFM: Nobody, for that reason. I read, as I always have, for pleasure, for the intense satisfaction of entering another life or another world. Why read a novel for any other reason? That said, when I read something that especially impresses me, of course I think about it and try to fathom how the writer achieved the effects I admire.

AA: What are you working on now?

NFM: Nothing. One of my daughters died in May, and I haven't yet recovered my desire to write. It's a very strange, sad, and disorienting world for me without Susan in it. For the first time in my life, since I was 12 years old, I no longer think of writing as something I must do and can't live without doing. Her death changed my perspective. What I'm trying to do is learn to live without her, with only the memory of her and what she left behind—her presence and her paintings. I have a very great deal of love and joy in my life—my husband, my three other children, my grandkids—but losing Susan has been a blow from which I haven't yet recovered. I don't think I ever will, not fully. I do hope, though, at some point, to get back to writing.

Ann Angel, a young adult writer and writing teacher at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, worked with Norma Fox Mazer, who was her advisor while Angel was pursuing her MFA from the writing program at Vermont College.

Recent books by Norma Fox Mazer:

Girlhearts Harpercollins Juvenile Books, 2001

Good Night, Maman Harcourt Brace, 1999

Crazy Fish Econo-Clad Books, 1998

When She was Good Scholastic Trade, 1997