

Caring About the Topic:

An Interview with Valerie Hobbs

With *Stefan's Story* barely off the presses, Valerie Hobbs is already deeply into her next project, *Letting Go* of Bobby James: Or How I Found My Self of Steam. Valerie not only captures adolescence in fiction but also teaches writing at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and perhaps even more challenging, she makes school visits to help kids understand that reading is not about taking tests but rather about developing "a natural love of reading." We know of no better way for kids to develop this love of reading than by reading one of the great works of Valerie Hobbs.



sity of California at Santa Barbara had caught fire from Berkeley, and, of course, the infamous bank burning took place in Isla Vista.¹ I was there with my brother, who had just come back from Viet Nam. We couldn't believe our eyes, of course. Nobody could. Then the riot police from LA arrived, riding in dump trucks and wearing riot gear and plastic masks. Our local sheriff flew passes over our heads, yelling through a megaphone to clear the streets. It was all very surreal and, of course, we ran for our lives,

choking on tear gas. I was involved in sit-ins, teach-ins, marches, consciousness raising stuff. But not as involved as I could have been, which may have given the book impetus, who knows? Hind-sight gives us all these chances to be bigger than we were!

TAR: Your novel *Sonny's War* (Frances Foster Books/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), a story of teenage life in Viet Nam era California as told through the eyes of 14-year-old Corin Davies, captures the spirit and specifics of the 1960's perfectly, from a day in the life of a typical teenager to a myriad of conflicting opinions about the war in Viet Nam. You actually were a teenager during that time, one of the most eventful, colorful, violent and volatile in our history. What can you tell us about your own experiences with Viet Nam, the Peace Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, political activism in general, various social revolutions, and a new focus on youth (don't trust anyone over thirty)?

TAR: Your treatment of that time in our history seems carefully, thoughtfully done, including the fact that the ending was not a black and white, predictable, melodramatic tearjerker. You seem to have a lot of respect for your readers; do you consciously avoid beating the reader over the head with social and political messages?

VH: I was in college during the protests. The Univer-

VH: I'm conscious only of the fact that I don't like to be lectured to, told what to think. I don't think any of us do, especially when we're young and, often, see more clearly than we do later. I do respect

young people, especially those who do attempt to think for themselves. The media is so much more overwhelming now than it was in the 60's, which makes it even harder to do that.

TAR: You first introduce us to fictitious Ojala, California, in 1995 as the setting for *How Far Would You Have Gotten if I Hadn't Called You Back?* and continue through *Sonny's War*, also set in Ojala. How different and how similar is Ojala, to Ojai, California, to where you, just like Bronwyn Lewis, moved from New Jersey as a young woman? Did you experience the same culture shock?

VH: Ojai is pretty much as I found it in the late '50s. It was a great culture shock for me. I lived an innocent, almost idyllic life as a teenager in Scotch Plains, New Jersey (sock hops, chocolate cokes at the juke joint, Italian boys who looked like John Travolta.) At least at school, I did. But Ojai was gun racks and pickup trucks, horses tied up in front of the police station. And then all those teens cruising mile-long Ojai Avenue from noon until after midnight, back and forth, back and forth, like wind-up toys. But that's hindsight. I thought it was all thrilling at the time.

TAR: Stefan, the protagonist in both *Carolina Crow Girl* (Frances Foster Books/ Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), and its sequel, *Stefan's Story* (Frances Foster Books/ Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), or Stefan Millington Crouch the Third, as the reporters refer to him when he blocks the path of the logging trucks with his wheel chair, is physically challenged. How is Stefan the same or different from any other teenage boy? Will readers easily identify with Stefan?

VH: Stefan was one of those "gifts" you hear writers talk about now and then. He came rolling out of that mansion as Carolina (and I) watched. I don't know how else to account for him and, no, he isn't different from any other teenage boy whom I've known. He does have different problems. When I speak with kids about Stefan, they don't talk about him as if he's different, and they're very matter-of-fact about his disability. Mainstreaming children with disabilities has made a difference, I think. Of

course kids would rather ride broomsticks than wheelchairs, so maybe it's a bigger problem than I know.

TAR: Also in *Stefan's Story*, we meet Hank (Henry Macias), a goodhearted and honest Paul Bunyan, who is on the opposite side of the controversy from Stefan and Carolina over logging the Haskell's Bay old growth forest. It's hard not to like Hank or wonder how he will support the family if he loses his source of income. As you were writing, you might have chosen to let Mr. Farnsworth, rich and powerful owner of Coastal Lumber represent the logging industry by himself. He would have been much easier to hate. Why did you choose to create Hank?

VH: It's the workers who get pinched in these things, people like Hank who are just trying to make a living. It's hard to be magnanimous about trees if your family is going to go hungry. Most people mean well (and do well if they can afford to—the rain forests are rapidly disappearing in countries where people have no other resources). Of course there's greed, there are the Farnsworths. But even he might have a story, if I wanted to give him one, a penurious childhood or something. But I don't think he's worth the trouble.

TAR: *Tender*, the title and topic of your 2001 work about Liv Trager who is forced to go and live with her father, an abalone diver, when her grandmother dies, has multiple possibilities for meaning. A tender is the person who handles the breathing line that keeps an undersea diver alive while working, but it also serves as a metaphor for the role that certain characters play for each other in the book. In addition, the adjective tender can mean "easily broken" but can also mean "loving" or "caring" (Merriam-Webster, 1210), which surely can apply to Liv, as well as to her father and his girlfriend, Samantha. Did the story come first or the title? How did you arrive at deep sea diving as a vehicle for the story?

VH: My first husband was an abalone diver, so I spent some time as a tender. Thirty years later, I'm driving south on 101, looking out at the ocean, and

almost watching this one come together. The title came with the job, so to speak, one of those wonderfully fortuitous things. And it came early. So I don't know how much it actually influenced the creation of Liv, her father, and Samantha, who are all very human, I think, which is to say loving and caring, broken and patched, as you point out the word tender can also mean.

TAR: You were a writing teacher at the University of California, Santa Barbara for 20 years or more. You have read and responded to hundreds of thousands of papers. What do you think the qualities of good writing are?

VH: Caring about the topic. Unfortunately, somewhere after middle-school all that gets forgotten and kids begin writing to teacher assignments, often about teacher-chosen books. Children love to write. Most of my college students hate it. Something happens in between that breaks my heart.

TAR: Who are your favorite authors and books, young adult or otherwise, and what do you read for enjoyment?

VH: I read almost nothing but fiction (I guess we can include newspapers in that category!). I try to read a lot of middle-grade and YA novels. Not only do I enjoy them, but I also learn from the masters like Paterson and Spinelli. I just finished *Stoner & Spaz* (Candlewick Press, 2002) by Ron Koertge and thought it was terrific, heartwarming and thought-provoking at the same time. *Durable Goods* (Random House, 1993), Elizabeth Berg's first novel, was, for me, such an eye-opening look at the way the voice of an adolescent can capture you, the reader. I've read it several times.

TAR: What did you learn about life when you worked as a waitress at the same time you were working on your graduate degree? Do any of those experiences end up in your writing?

VH: Well, I continually told myself that I wasn't "really a waitress." I was getting an advanced degree, after all. Certainly as far as my writing goes, I learned as much from waiting on people as I

did studying great literature. I worked for many years in a restaurant on the breakwater here in Santa Barbara, a wonderful setting overlooking the old fishing boats. The sun would set about the time I started work, turning the hills above the harbor the most beautiful golden-pink. I knew I was living a special time in my life then, though I never got over thinking the work was somehow beneath me. That restaurant, as well as some of the harbor characters, has turned up in several of my short stories published in literary and women's magazines. I keep flirting with the idea of setting a novel there, and may do it one of these days.

TAR: What advice do you have for aspiring young writers and for teachers of writing?

VH: The late professor Douwe Stuurman, for whom I was a reader at the University of California, Santa Barbara in the late 1970s, once asked the 500 students in a lecture hall how many of them wanted to be writers. About two-thirds held up their hands. Then he asked how many were actually writing and most of those hands went down. "A writer is someone who writes," he said. "The rest of you are just dreamers."

Until I began writing in earnest, I thought being a writer, a real writer, meant you had to sit down everyday and write, confront the blank page or screen and get something down. But a lot of my "writing" takes place in my head, while I'm walking or doing laundry. I think we all discover our own writing process, if we're serious enough about it. I have a friend who writes exactly one page a day and finishes one 300+ page novel a year. I suppose I'd finally say that if we're compelled to write, we write, whether we get published or not. The desire to be a writer doesn't take us far, but the compulsion really does. I'm not sure if we're born with it or are infected with it. And sometimes it feels more like a burden than a gift. But you know when you've got it, that's for sure.

This could cost me my job (I'm kidding), but I don't believe, finally, that writing can be "taught." Beginning writers can learn from more experienced ones as apprentices learned from craftsmen or artists, perhaps by practicing technique, modeling, one-on-one guidance. Lessons out-of-context (that

is, unless they directly apply to something a student has written and wants to revise) are just so much wasted breath.

TAR: What is a typical day like for you?

VH: I walk just about every day, for about an hour. Or I work out at the gym. Then I'm either writing or agonizing about the fact that I can't think of anything worth writing about. In the afternoon I get to play with my year-old grandson, Diego, or teach my class at the university. I also teach a private class in writing for teens, which I enjoy tremendously. I haven't yet told these students I'm not teaching them anything because they're learning so much.

TAR: You are one of the brave authors who goes out to schools and works with the very students who read your books. What typically happens when you visit a school? Any interesting stories?

VH: I'm actually fairly terrified of school visits and don't do them often. I enjoy going to the Santa Barbara Montessori School and the Marymount School because the students there are great readers and are generally full of questions about my books. I avoid visiting schools that have adopted scripted reading programs or don't encourage kids to read "real" (as opposed to text) books. I'm very concerned about this move away from literature toward publisher-generated reading programs and tests. It's the fastest way to kill a natural love of reading that I know of.

TAR: What project are you working on now?

VH: It's so brand-new that I'm afraid to talk about it. I don't even know if I should be writing about the particular topic that has grabbed me, or if the book (a YA, I think) will be published when I'm finished. It's one of those things that feels bigger than I am, something Katherine Paterson wouldn't be afraid of, but that I'm afraid of; which lets me know I need to do it.

1. The incident referred to here happened in the community of Isla Vista, an area adjacent to the University of California Santa Barbara primarily composed of student housing. On February 25, 1970, during riots protesting the war in Viet Nam, the Bank of America building was set on fire. (Isla Vista Resources, 1)

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