

“Finish that chapter, then lights out:”

A Reader Becomes a Writer. A Visit with Vivian Vande Velde

Vivian Vande Velde writes some hauntingly memorable novels for the young adult market—from *Heir Apparent* to *Being Dead*, a collection of short stories. Ms. Vande Velde was kind enough to be interviewed about her memorable characters, unexpected plot twists, and what led her down the road to becoming an award-winning author. Through our discussion, we find that Ms. Vande Velde grew up reading—books and plays (with a strong love for *To Kill a Mockingbird*). And, though early in her schooling, teachers rarely called on her to read her own writing aloud, Ms. Vande Velde has certainly made up lost time as teachers and students alike are now extremely eager to read her works. For more information about the author, you can check out her website at <http://www.vivianvandelde.com>.

LG: Something I’m always curious about with successful authors—what types of books inspired you to be a writer? Did you have a favorite mystery writer?

VVV: I always knew I wanted to be an author, but it was when I was in 8th grade and read T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King* that I absolutely knew what kind of story I wanted to write. It’s the story of King Arthur—not a scholarly search for the Dark-Ages, historic Arthur, but a story full of anachronisms and peopled by interesting, flawed characters. I couldn’t tell who to root for because they were often on opposing sides—yet I cared deeply for all of them.

When I was a young adult, there were not so many books specifically for teenagers. I went pretty much from children’s books to adult books.

My parents used to get those Readers Digest Condensed Books. (Now I’m horrified at the idea of abridged versions, but in my own defense, I think I started reading them when I was too young to know what the word “condensed” meant. I think it also goes a long way toward explaining my short attention span.) I first read Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when I was ten, in the Readers Digest version. I have since, of course, read the whole thing, and when I am absolutely pinned down to name one book as being the best in American literature—that’s it.

I also read a lot of plays—not being in a situation to actually *go* to plays. (Which—now that I think about *that*—might explain why I so favor action and dialogue and have little patience with description.) My favorite play was Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which kind of fills in the cracks of the story of *Hamlet*, which—as long as I’m talking about favorites—is my favorite play by Shakespeare.

As a young adult I liked Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, J.D. Salinger, J.R.R. Tolkien, Mary Renault’s stories of ancient Greece, some John Steinbeck (I have to put in a plug for his never-completed work *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, which was published posthumously and would have been a masterpiece), and I always knew Graham Greene was brilliant—just didn’t always understand him.

LG: Please tell us a little about your childhood and school years.

VVV: In a classroom situation, there are always some kids who are considered to be the really good writers—they are the ones who pretty generally get their work read out loud as good examples, year after year, by teacher after teacher. I was never one of those. I was one of the ones who *might* get her paper read after those—if there was time.

But I did love reading. I even liked most of the required reading in school. I know a lot of people don't have patience with, for example, Charles Dickens—but I did enjoy the richness of his stories and of his language. (Despite my short attention span.) Still, my favorite Dickens story is the shortest: *A Christmas Carol*. If I could take credit for one book written by someone else—that would be the one I would choose.

LG: When did you take on writing as a career?

VVV: I enjoyed stories so much—books, TV, movies—that I wanted to be involved in creating stories of my own. For example, I loved fairy tales, but wondered why the princess always had to be beautiful. (Why couldn't she have a bad hair day once in a while?) Why was the prince always fearlessly brave? (I find a little bit of self-doubt very appealing in a character.)

I love reading. At night my parents would tell me, "Finish that chapter, then lights out." But I'd get so caught up in the story, that (sometimes intentionally, sometimes without even noticing), I often just kept on reading. Then I'd get in trouble with my parents.

For some reason (probably having to do with a dark, twisted psyche), that's what I wanted to do: write stories that were so engrossing I would get other kids in trouble with their parents.

LG: You have picture books and adult fantasy novels, as well as young adult novels. Why did you choose to write for the YA market?

VVV: Writing for young people is the most important writing there is. An adult—the kind of adult who reads—is going to read hundreds of books over the 50 or 60 years of his or her (average) adulthood. Naturally, childhood is much shorter, meaning that there are only a relatively small number of books a

child can read, and that is limited further by reading ability and interest in subject matter. So, it is a very short window of opportunity. And yet that is precisely the time of life when tastes and opinions are being formed—including, even, whether reading is worthwhile and if that child is going to grow up to be one of those adults who reads.

LG: And, more specifically, why fantasy and science fiction for that age group?

VVV: The most basic answer is that I write the kinds of stories I like to read.

I enjoy fantasy and science fiction because I find those stories can deal with universal questions, and yet—because the specifics of the stories are fantastical—the stories are non-judgmental and non-confrontational and might open a reader up to new ways of looking at things. So, for example, *Companions of the Night* is a vampire story. Yet one of the issues it deals with is good girls attracted to bad boys. The blood-sucking undead is about as bad as a boy can get, and therefore readers can understand the situation, can clearly see what Ethan is, and can make up their own minds about how Kerry reacts and what choices she makes—without being distracted or burdened down the way they might have if the story had been more realistic, with details that hit too close to home.

LG: You've written novels and short stories. Which do you feel is the best approach for your writing style and for getting a story across?

VVV: There isn't one "best" approach. Some stories can be told in fewer words, with fewer complications, subplots, and characters; others need more scope.

So, for example, a story that asks the question, "When you're driving along the highway and you come to a spot where there's a bunch of those orange traffic cones forcing three lanes of traffic down to one, and when—finally—you drive by where the construction workers are, and they don't seem to be actually working but look as though they're just hanging around watching the traffic crawl by—are they *really* construction workers, or might they be trolls disguised as construction

workers?”—that’s a short story. A story that asks, “What do you do when you’re falsely accused of something and can’t prove that you didn’t do it?”—that’s a novel.

LG: What about reaching your young adult audience? Do you find that young adults prefer short stories or novels?

VVV: There are some occasions when you want something shorter, that you can read in one sitting, that can quickly expose you to one idea then leave you alone to think about it. There are other times when you want to immerse yourself in another world, in a company of characters with all their needs and emotions.

LG: How do you divide your writing time—novels vs. short stories, science fiction vs. fantasy vs. mystery vs. supernatural?

VVV: Some authors are full of ideas, with not enough time to write them all. I’m a one-idea-at-a-time sort of writer. So I don’t plan ahead. Each time I finish a book, I worry that I’ll never write another, because I don’t have a reserve. So I’m certainly not saying, “Well, next I’ll do this sort, and then I’m scheduled for one of those, and oops! I haven’t done one of that kind in a bit . . .” So when I get an idea—I run with it.

LG: In your book *Being Dead* (2001), you present a collection of seven short stories, all dealing with death and the supernatural. What is the appeal of these types of stories?

VVV: The one thing that all people have in common is that we will all, eventually, die. So it’s only natural to wonder what happens after that. Though I believe in an afterlife, I don’t believe in ghosts. Still, I find the idea of ghosts fascinating.

LG: After reading *Being Dead*, I find there’s one short story I can’t get away from: “Drop By Drop.” I can’t escape Brenda Keehm’s story. Why is it so captivating?

VVV: What’s really gratifying about *Being Dead* is that, for every story in that collection, I have heard

at least one person say, “That’s my favorite.” I wanted to try all sorts of different ghost stories. Some of the ghosts are friendly, some malevolent. In “Shadow Brother,” the reader has to decide for himself or herself whether there even is a ghost—or just a father’s feelings of sorrow and guilt. I have to admit “Drop by Drop” is my favorite, too. Thanks for your kind words.

LG: I really wasn’t prepared for the ending. You hooked us in with the haunted house story, and we expect it to follow the traditional line—the ghost of a murdered child still haunts her house. Then you make an unexpected turn in the story. How did you decide on such a plot line?

VVV: OK—spoiler alert. Don’t read this if you’re planning on reading the story soon, because here’s the whole plot: “Drop by Drop” starts out as though it’s going to be a teenage-girl-coping-when-she’s-forced-to-move-because-her-parents-buy-a-new-house story, except that the house seems to be haunted. Brenda investigates, thinking she’ll find that a child of a former owner died. But there are no dead children tied to the history of the house. Then she hears about a missing child who fits the description of the ghost that only she can see, and she assumes the child was murdered and dumped on their property. But that doesn’t turn out to be right either. Maybe, Brenda figures, the ghost is coming to her for help. “What’s the worst thing Leah-Ann can want?” Brenda asks herself, and thinks it’s to track down Leah-Ann’s parents and break the news to them that Leah-Ann is dead. In the end, Brenda comes to realize that the reason Leah-Ann is haunting her is because—even though Brenda didn’t know it—Brenda herself is the one who caused Leah-Ann’s death, when Brenda was out doing some unauthorized drinking and driving the night she said good-bye to her friends in the old neighborhood.

Again, this is one of those issues that I thought I could handle better in a fantasy format than as strictly realistic fiction. Brenda is basically a good girl. I’m hoping that in the first 59 pages (admittedly, it’s a very *long* short story), readers are sympathetic with her plight of being forced to leave her home and her friends; that they will find her

observations sharp and funny, and her reactions to her family typical in an amusing way; that they will think she is both brave and generous in her attempts to resolve the ghost's problem. Then, once readers have totally identified with Brenda, the truth comes out on the last pages: That Brenda has accidentally run over and killed a child, and—because she was drinking—wasn't even aware of it. One child dead, another who will have to live with the consequences of that for the rest of her life.

Yes, I could have written a realistic don't-drink-and-drive story. But this story is for those kids who wouldn't have read that one.

LG: Then there's your Halloween short story in Deborah Noyes' collection of short stories, *Gothic!: Ten Original Dark Tales*. Again, I thought I could see where the story was leading, but you veered off the traditional plot line trail again. How did you determine this twist?

VVV: As with "Drop by Drop," what you call "the twist" was my reason for writing the story. In "Morgan Roehmar's Boys," I was again thinking about ghosts and wondering if a ghost would necessarily look the way the person had looked at the moment of death—or if the ghost could choose to look the way he had at some previous time in his life. And if a malevolent ghost could use that to his advantage.

LG: In another of your novels, *Heir Apparent*, you interspersed touches of humor with a scary tale of a girl trying to battle her way to survival in a virtual reality game. This seems to add a different dimension of fear for readers, who find themselves drawn in to the struggle of determining what is real and what isn't. Is it the mix of humor and fear that make this book so popular among teens?

VVV: Many of my books have characters who are sarcastic—which generally makes the reading lighter and more fun. Sometimes that sarcastic character is the protagonist, sometimes it's someone the protagonist has to deal with. If a character was to whine and mope, that wouldn't be any fun to read—and we'd be less interested in seeing that character solve his problems and attain his goal. Generally speaking, we like people who make us

laugh. If we like someone, then we worry about him when he's in danger.

LG: Why do you think young adults are so intrigued by your tales of murder and mystery, such as those in *Being Dead* and the Gothic tales?

VVV: People ask: Which is more important, characters or plot? And the thing is that they are both very closely intertwined. It's hard to say, "That's an interesting character" if the person is in a boring situation. At the same time, you can be reading a story where the existence of the universe is in jeopardy, and if you don't care about the characters, the story leaves you feeling "So what?"

So, I try to write about likeable, interesting characters. (Beginning writers ask: "Does the main character *need* to be likeable?" Well, no, not always and absolutely. But who do you prefer to spend time with?) Then I put them in a bad situation. (We all hope for health, happiness, and good times for ourselves and our loved ones. But that *does* make for dull reading.)

LG: Can you give us a preview of what other projects you have in store for us?

VVV: Coming up in 2005 are three YA novels.

In January, from Harcourt: *Now You See It . . .* which is about a modern-day girl who finds a pair of glasses that allows her to see stuff nobody else can see. As a result, she travels to a world of elves, witches, and dragons, as well as to the 1950s, where she meets her own grandmother as a young woman. (By the way, I have seen the cover by Cliff Nielsen—and it's fantastic!)

In the spring, from Houghton Mifflin: *The Book of Mordred*, a look at the King Arthur story from the viewpoint of three young women who have been helped, one way or another, by Mordred, Arthur's son—who is usually the villain of any stories about Camelot.

And in the fall, from Marshall Cavendish: *Witch Dreams*, about a young witch living in medieval times who can see into other people's dreams—and who uses this power to try to solve the murder of her family.

LG: Thank you, Vivian.

