

## Finding His Voice and Capturing Hearts:

*Chatting with Novelist Vince Vawter*

**W**hen we first met Vince Vawter at the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English 2013 conference, we were struck by his graciousness and sincerity. He, author of the newly released novel *Paperboy* (2013), had agreed to serve as the luncheon keynote speaker. Vince took the stand, suffered through the introduction, complimented the pronunciation of his hometown (Louisville, Tennessee; the /s/ is pronounced), adjusted the microphone, and began to speak. He talked of the difficulties he experienced as a student with a speech impediment, of the long search to find his voice, and of the gratitude he felt for an English teacher who challenged him to move outside of his comfort zone. In a matter of mere minutes, Vince had moved beyond talking about his novel and writing; this veteran newspaper writer had captured the hearts of English teachers from across the state with his sincere and genuine words.

A few short months later, we received a brief, very modest announcement from Vince. His debut novel, *Paperboy* (2013), had been named a 2014 Newbery Honor book. His story, set in a segregated 1959 Memphis, allows the 11-year-old main character, Little Man, to find his voice. But more than this, perhaps, is that the writing of the story, beyond its accolades and reception by readers, allows the world to see that a speech impediment such as stuttering does not define who you are or what you may become.

Likely because of this very issue, Vince's voice resonates with all who meet him. Wanting to hear more about *Paperboy* (2013), Vince's writing, and his

issues with stuttering—and to share his responses with a larger audience—we asked if we might be able to interview him. He graciously agreed, and we presented questions pertaining to those topics and more to the Newbery Honor book winner. His responses are candid, heartfelt, and inspiring.

### ***Paperboy* Summary**

Vince Vawter's debut novel, *Paperboy* (2013), tells the story of Little Man (readers don't discover his name until the end) and his experiences over the course of one summer. In this coming-of-age tale set in segregated Memphis, Tennessee, during 1959, readers feel for Little Man and the difficulties he faces. With a very pronounced stutter, Little Man compensates by focusing on being the best baseball player he can be. When he takes on the responsibility of a paper route, Little Man is forced to face more than just his fear of speaking to strangers. He realizes as the summer unfolds that sometimes making a choice to take a stand for what is right may mean doing something that is wrong.

Vawter's tale presents civil rights issues—including violence, separation of Whites and Blacks on buses, and the abhorrence of the “N” word—through the eyes of an 11-year-old boy. His words and thoughts unfold through the s-s-s-s-s-stutters and through the typed words that he is unable to say. Told in a poignant manner, readers realize that relationships, regardless of skin color or blood ties, are founded on mutual respect, sacrifice, and love.

## The Conversation

**MC & KT:** You have a long history of newspaper journalism. What inspired you to write your first novel for young adults instead of a nonfiction piece?

**VV:** Mr. Spiro, one of the main characters in *Paperboy*, tells the young boy that more truth can be found in fiction than nonfiction, just as a painting can be more truthful than a photograph. I truly believe that. I think the best way to get at the story I wanted to tell was through autobiographical fiction.

**MC & KT:** Describe what you mean by autobiographical fiction.

**VV:** It's simply the merging of autobiographical and fictional elements in a story. Some call *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) a work of autobiographical fiction since many real people (Truman Capote, for example) can be identified as characters. Only one character in my novel does not come from my childhood.

**MC & KT:** Is the "housekeeper" in *Paperboy* based on a real person? If so, please describe the effect this relationship had on you as you wrote *Paperboy*.

**VV:** "Mam" is probably the character in the book that most resembles her real-life counterpart from my childhood. I loved her dearly and unconditionally when I was a child, and I finally got to explore that relationship further by writing my book. As an 11-year-old boy, I knew she was special without knowing why. I now know her to be one of the strongest and smartest women I have ever known.

**MC & KT:** Thinking about the civil unrest that characterized Memphis, Tennessee, during the 1950s and your relationship with your housekeeper, we noticed that you did not use racial terms that were historically accurate for that time period. Was this a deliberate omission? If so, what impacted your choice to avoid the derogatory but common terms of that time period?

**VV:** This was a struggle because I wanted my story to ring true, but I also spent 40 years of my life keep-

ing such derogatory words out of my newspapers. I finally arrived at a compromise that, in my opinion, portrayed the intensity and hate of the word without printing the word itself.

**MC & KT:** How has the culture, both Appalachian (East Tennessee, which you currently call home) and Southern (West Tennessee, where the novel is set), impacted your writing?

**VV:** Hemingway said you have to leave a place before you can write about it. I agree completely. It would stand to reason, then, that if I ever decided to write something with an Appalachian setting, I would have to move. Well, don't expect that Appalachian novel because I'm not leaving.

**MC & KT:** What books have most influenced your life?

**VV:** The first book I became hopelessly addicted to was *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) by Johann David Wyss. I would finish reading the last page then turn to the front and start reading again. I started reading Hemingway as a sophomore in high school and have never overcome that addiction. I continue to reread him when I should be broadening my literary horizons.

**MC & KT:** Has your addiction to reading Hemingway influenced you as a writer? If so, how?

**VV:** Hemingway never wastes one word. When reading Hemingway, the reader gets the feeling that if one word was extracted, the entire story would come crashing down. I try to make every word, even a preposition, count.

**MC & KT:** Do you recall how your interest in writing originated?

**VV:** Just like the central character in *Paperboy*, I began banging on a typewriter when I was 8 or 9 years old. I loved to see the words I could not say come out of the ends of my fingers. There is a poem in *Paperboy* that is much like one I wrote when I was 10 or 11. I realize it's not a very good poem—then or now—but passion trumps talent.

**MC & KT:** Is there anything you find particularly challenging about writing?

**VV:** It's probably a good thing I started in newspapers because there was always a deadline at hand. I can spend hours fiddling with one turn of phrase or an issue of syntax or tone. I may be the slowest writer on the planet.

**MC & KT:** What phrase or syntax or tone led to fiddling while writing *Paperboy*?

**VV:** On page 58, there's a paragraph that begins: "No luck. The D sound stuck in my throat like . . . ." My first draft said something like "stuck in my throat with a thud." This never sounded right. I probably tried 15 or 20 different similes to convey that thought. Nothing sounded right. I gave up and took the phrase out. One day at a dog park, I saw a man throwing a tennis ball for his dog. He threw it hard, and it stuck in the fence. The dog was chewing on the ball trying to get it out. I almost jumped with excitement. I put the phrase down in my phone because I knew it was perfect. "The D sound stuck in my throat like a tennis ball in a chain-link fence."

**MC & KT:** Was it difficult moving from writing nonfiction, especially newspaper writing, into the realm of fictional writing?

**VV:** Extremely difficult. That's one reason it took me more than six years to write the book. Journalists "tell" rather than show. Novelists must "show." This is a seemingly simple phrase thrown about in many MFA courses, but the concept is more difficult. In my work, for instance, instead of repeatedly saying that Little Man was confused by his feelings for Mrs. Worthington, I tried to show that confusion.

**MC & KT:** What was the most difficult aspect of writing *Paperboy*?

**VV:** I had to pull off a lot of old scabs when I was writing *Paperboy*, so much so that my speech would suffer some at the end of a long day of writing. But that was

a small price to pay in order to have the chance to tell my story the way I wanted to.

**MC & KT:** Both you and your main character struggled with stuttering. Did/Do you view stuttering as a disability? Did others around you view it as a disability?

**VV:** In my view, stuttering is certainly a disability. At the height of the Vietnam War in 1967 and as badly as the country needed recruits, I was given a 4-F medical deferment due to my speech impediment. Others around me were generally confused by my speech since I had "good days" and "bad days" due to my reliance on covert stuttering and word substitution. My sense is that they thought—erroneously—that I could control my stutter, so they probably didn't view it as a disability per se.

**MC & KT:** Did your stuttering impact your learning or your grades in any way?

**VV:** Yes, very much so, but in a way that might not be readily apparent and one I didn't realize at the time. Besides the obvious issues of not speaking in class or taking part in group projects, I also chose to find my self-worth in athletics. I paid much more attention to sports than to my studies with the reasoning that the only way I could make it in the world was with my physical skills and not my verbal skills. I was the epitome of an "all-out jock" in high school. Everything seemed to be going fine until I got into college and realized I wasn't as good an athlete as I thought I was.

**MC & KT:** How did your teachers and classmates react to your stuttering?

**VV:** I don't want this to sound like sour grapes because this was the 1950s and speech pathology was nowhere close to where it is today. My teachers essentially ignored it by not challenging me and letting me slide. I was the prototypical elephant in the room. I had only one friend in whom I ever confided. You will recognize him in the book as the character named "Rat." I also think this is probably a "Southern thing." If one doesn't acknowl-

edge something or talk about it, then that means it doesn't exist. This is a very unhealthy attitude.

**MC & KT:** In your speeches, you talk about the influence of Chaucer and one of your English teachers. How did this teacher impact your life?

**VV:** My English teacher during my sophomore year in college required all her students to recite the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1475/2003). I tried to get out of it, even calling on my baseball coach to intercede. I fought her every way I could, but she would not relent. It was a terrifying time for me, and I resented her mightily at the time, but looking back, it might have been the start of my long journey to finding my voice. I had given up on myself, but she refused to. It would have been easy for her to let me slide, but she challenged me. I will forever thank her.

**MC & KT:** How did living with what others might call a disability enhance your abilities in other areas, such as writing?

**VV:** More than once while speaking at schools, I have been asked if I thought I would have become a writer if I had not had a speech impediment. My answer is that I'm fairly confident I wouldn't have written *Paperboy*, and while I might have been a writer, my speech probably made me a better writer. For one thing, if you're not talking all the time, you tend to listen more—a good trait for a writer. Also, when I went into management later in my career, I think I had an increased empathy for employees who were struggling with various issues.

**MC & KT:** Is there a message in your novel that you want readers to grasp?

**VV:** Even though a person might not have a speech impediment, everyone needs to search for his or her own true voice. It has to do with honestly knowing yourself.

**MC & KT:** What advice do you have for young adult readers, especially those with disabilities, who are searching for their own true voice?

**VV:** I have been asked to speak at several speech pathology conventions where I usually share my 3-part Stuttering Manifesto. While it focuses on stuttering, I think it can be used for most issues young folks are facing. Here we go:

1. *Stuttering is what we do when we try NOT to stutter.* In trying to talk like everyone else, we create problems for ourselves. Search for your true self and voice, and be happy with it.
2. *Stuttering is not cured. It is overcome.* The first step in battling any issue is to admit the issue exists and to deal with it head on. Covert stuttering or covert behavior of any kind is deadly.
3. *Fluency is not all it's cracked up to be.* Few people, including highly compensated TV news anchors, approach even 90% clinical fluency. Don't worry about failing. Everyone does.

**MC & KT:** Winning a Newbery Honor is a huge experience. Describe the moment you found out and what you felt and thought.

**VV:** My agent called me on the Sunday before the Newbery books were to be announced on Monday. We chatted only briefly about it, and then I forgot about it completely. When the phone rang at 6:30 the next morning, I froze in bed. My wife started shouting for me to get up. I have always castigated winners of various awards (Oscars, Emmys, Golden Globes) on TV for their silly looks of astonishment. Never again.

**MC & KT:** What comes next? Do you have plans for a second novel? Are you currently working on anything in particular?

**VV:** *Paperboy* was written in obscurity and with only self-generated pressure. When I sit down to write now, I can feel the extra weight of a first novel. I continue to write, but I certainly can't make any promises. I've learned just enough about the fiction-writing process to be thoroughly mystified by it.

For more information about Vince Vawter and *Paperboy* (2013), please visit his website at <http://www.vincevawter.com>.

**Melissa Comer**, a professor of Literacy at Tennessee Tech University, is a former president of the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English (TCTE) and former coeditor, along with Kristen Trent, of *Visions & Revisions*, TCTE's online newsletter. Melissa has written numerous articles that highlight young adult literature (YAL) and has presented at multiple local, state, national, and international workshops to promote YAL.

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TRA, and serves on the editorial review board for *The Reading Teacher*, published by the International Reading Association. She is an avid reader and a shameless book pusher of Appalachian children's and young adult literature.

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