

# An Interview with Randy Powell

by Don Gallo

*Editor's Note: The following interview has been excerpted and adapted from the Authors4Teens.com Website with the permission of Don Gallo, Randy Powell, and Greenwood Publishing Company.* —psc

If you want to be a writer, Randy Powell says, "Don't talk about it, just do it. And keep doing it. Work, work, work." And that's exactly what he does, writing in the early morning hours before heading off to his full-time day job as a technical writer for the Boeing Company in Seattle. Randy Powell has published several novels about teenagers who are finding their way through unsettled lives.

DG: What exactly does a technical writer do at Boeing?

RP: I mainly rewrite stuff written by the engineers. I've been here about 12 years. There's a huge amount of documentation that goes into building an airplane—the amount of documentation is probably three times the weight of an airplane.

DG: Wow. That's a lot of paper. Having a full-time job writing technical stuff, when do you find—or I should say make—time to write? You said in an interview published in VOYA (June 2000) that you get up at 3:30 in the morning. Really?

RP: Yeah, I still get up early to write. It's my favorite time of the day, actually. It's funny how many times I get asked, "Well, if you get up that early, what time do you go to bed?" I really get tired of that question! I've said this before and I'll say it again. Sleep, work, money, health, exercise, leisure time, etc.—you never really have enough. Enough is relative. You grab what you can. Robert Frost, when he was still a full time farmer, was asked how he had the time to write, to be a poet. He replied, "Like a thief I steal some of it, like a man I seize some of it, and I have a little in my tin cup to begin with." I honestly try not to talk too much anymore about actual working hours, or writing process, because I found myself becoming pretty self-conscious. And I found that while you may be curious about someone else's work habits, sleep habits, eating habits, and writing process, you have to find your own and not pay much attention to anyone else's, because it's not going to do you much good.

I do write every day, on my computer. When I travel, I print up the manuscript and bring it with me, but also try to get a lot of reading done. Lately, sometimes when I'm in the middle of writing, I'll pick up a book and start reading it.

DG: You are right, of course, about every individual finding his/her own best way to write. But I find it interesting to

know how other people do their thing, if only to learn that, hey, I do it that way too! Or, gee, I'm not so weird after all. So I hesitate to ask this because of what you said earlier, but what are you willing to tell us about how you actually go about writing?

RP: It really isn't all that unique. As Kurt Vonnegut says, there are two types of writer: the swooper and the basher. The basher is like Paul Fleischman, where a good day's work is one page. The swooper is like me. I can type two or three thousand words in an hour, and sometimes write ten thousand words in a day. Often it will be ten thousand words of nothing but stream of consciousness or maybe walking

through a scene, trying to get the setting right. Some of it might be talking to myself. The manuscript I'm currently writing is 130,000 words. I will whittle it down to maybe 50,000, go through several drafts of expanding, cutting, expanding, cutting. All the while, I'm trying

to figure out what the story is about, what the heart of the story is. I usually have a lot of characters—like maybe 10 or 12—and I have to cut them or merge them. My wife is my first reader, and I'll give her a draft and have her read it and tell me what she thinks it's about. I tend to focus on the particulars, on the details, and on the scenes. Finding the Big Picture is the main challenge for me.

This process is the same for every writer: inspiration, development, revision. Some writers do much of it in their head; some writers don't know what they want to say, or what they think, until they start writing it.

I think sometimes it's good to write sloppy first drafts. A lot of stuff gets into sloppy first drafts that surprises you.

Just the act of fast and furious typing can sometimes lead to discoveries. For example, typos can lead to interesting words. Like instead of saying "sense of humor" a character might say "sneeze of humor"—because it was originally a typo. (That's a poor example but the only one I can think of at the moment.)

DG: Thank you for those insights. I appreciate that.

RP: Here are some additional thoughts. For the past 25 years I've been reading books on writing, looking at process, trying to analyze how a novel gets written. And I don't think it ever happens the same way twice. At least not for me.

Where I work at Boeing, it's all about process. You have a process for, say, putting tags on drawings that have been rejected by Quality Control or something. The whole idea is to find the best way to do something, document it, and then do it that way every time.

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With writing, that just isn't the way it works. It may sound pretentious, but with writing a novel, you're bringing something alive into the world, and you don't always know what it is or what it means, and it has to germinate and grow in its own way. I think the story will tell you how it wants to be written. Then you can always go back and add little tricks and techniques—for instance, the element of delay, to add suspense; or vivid details that appeal to the senses—that kind of stuff you can definitely learn. The story pretty much has to grow organically.

**DG:** The comparison between writing and working at Boeing helps a great deal. You do school and library visits. Of what value are they to your writing?

**RP:** I don't do very many. In fact, last year I think I did about three. I really enjoy the kids, but, based on my limited experience so far with school visits, I don't know if they would be all that much value to my writing. You know, I see teenagers, young people—at a baseball game or the mall or somewhere—and I can't imagine that they actually read my books, and it scares me to think that they are my "audience" because I don't know them. I think it would be the kiss of death if I spent a lot of time around young people and then tried somehow to write my books to "appeal" to them. Just as it would be the kiss of death to hang around librarians and try to write a novel that I think they would like. I can't hang around shopping malls with a pad and pencil, recording the latest teen lingo or fashion. I can't go into classrooms and say, "What would you like me to write?"

So then who am I writing for? I've asked myself this question many times. I'm not writing for one ideal reader. I don't even know if I'm actually writing for myself. In some ways, I think I'm writing for the reader I used to be when I was a young person. In many ways that reader is a better reader than I am now as an adult. Kids have this capacity to throw themselves into a book and experience it with all their heart and imagination, and I think this capacity grows dimmer as we become adults.

But more than anything, I'm writing not for myself or someone else but for the story itself. I'm trying to make the best possible story I can. When you're writing a novel, you're too worried about the mechanics of telling a story to worry about who's actually going to be reading it. I'm kind of lucky because, actually, I can rely on people like you—teachers and librarians—to do the worrying about who's going to read it. Does that make sense?

If a guy makes furniture, he's just trying to make the most beautiful piece of furniture he can, that's all he's worried about; he's completely into the aesthetics of the object, and he's not too worried about who's going to use it. Granted, there are a few concessions you have to make. If you write a book, you do want to be read. You don't want to be unread. So you focus on how can I make this readable—pacing, suspense, richness of details, motivation, on and on and on. These are the things you focus on when you're writing. And most importantly, on telling the truth that's in your heart.

**DG:** Yes, that makes a lot of sense.

**RP:** In writing, there are so many paradoxes. For example, which comes first, action or character? How can you know what the action is unless you first know and love your character? How can you love your character without knowing him? How can you really know him without knowing what his actions are that propel the plot forward? Should I worry about my plot or should I just focus on the individual scenes? How can I spend time polishing a scene without knowing

how it fits into the big picture? There are so many questions, you see, so many. There isn't time to think about the reader. Also, every time I've told myself something like, "I'm going to leave this in because this will really add a lot of suspense in the reader's mind"—my wife and/or my editor catch it, and they say, "That's false." The false things that get into your writing are the ones that don't come from your heart—they're the artificial things.

I could go on and on about writing. As I said, it's what I've thought about for 25 years. I keep a journal/notebook and in it I often talk to myself about these issues. Millions of words, ramblings. But I'm still an apprentice writer. And every time I write a novel, it's a new experience, and I have to ask myself one very important question: Why am I doing this?

**DG:** So, why are you writing books about teenagers? Why not write for adults ... or little kids? And why do you write about the things you do?

**RP:** Well, at the risk of sounding overly mystical, I really believe that when you write from the heart, you don't necessarily have any choice about the themes and stories you write. They choose you as much as you choose them. I wouldn't mind writing in different genres, for different age groups. I would welcome it. But I also believe in staying with your niche and working at that as well as you can.

The themes that I choose—or that choose me—are those related to growing up, breaking free of your parents, maturing, finding your identity and purpose. For me and for many people those teenage years are the most memorable, painful, exhilarating. That's the time of questioning, searching, trying to figure out what the purpose of your life is, whether there is any purpose to life, whether it's all an accident subject to luck, or whether there's such a thing as destiny. Relationships get more complex. There's a huge gray area. Coming of age, rites of passage. Getting your driver's license. Driving equals freedom. Not a whole lot of responsibility—but a lot of responsibilities and choices looming just ahead. As I've said before, when I think back to high school, sometimes I burn with regret and embarrassment, sometimes I'm nostalgic, sometimes I laugh, sometimes I'm sentimental. Those experiences make for good raw material. I suppose all of us maybe have, oh, say, 10 or 20 major turning points in our life—some of them good, some of them bad. We write about those peak events, turning points, and epiphanies over and over. A lot of them come during our teenage years.

Maybe a better answer to that question is that I often think



*Photo of Randy Powell*

and write and start a novel with a certain voice—and that voice seems always to be about 15, 16, 17, somewhere in that territory.

I've tried to write with a younger protagonist, but he ends up sounding 15. Gardner in *Run If you Dare* was originally based on a seventh grader. Based on some of my memories from 7th grade. But my editor told me he sounded 15 or 16, and she was right.

DG: He does to me, too. What's your greatest fear as a writer?

RP: We all want to have our work valued and taken seriously. By now I'm used to people not understanding what YA fiction is. What scares me is when I talk to so-called reading teachers and experts who still shake their heads and say things like, "Kids love reading when they're in K-6, but when they get into middle school, the interest level drops, and they don't read anymore for enjoyment, and those few who do still enjoy reading go straight to adult books." By now I'm used to it when parents tell me, "Oh, my little Johnny is such a good reader that he skipped right past YA books and went straight to Grisham and King." What scares me is when reading teachers and librarians say that exact same thing, as though all YA books are simply "stepping stone" books to "real" literature like Grisham or JA Jance or Mary Higgins Clark! What scares me is people who are in the reading profession who have a bleak outlook on the state of books and reading. I went to the IRA in New Orleans a couple weeks ago, and 99 percent of it is inspiring, when I see all the dedication and knowledge and understanding and effort. But then I run into that one percent who complain about how kids don't read anymore, and I want to tell them to get another job.

DG: I'm with you on that. So your fear is what?

RP: I fear that the audience (the one that I claim I don't target) will diminish. But most of the time, I'm very optimistic about this literacy issue. I think just the opposite is happening, thanks to dedicated teachers, librarians, etc. I know that in my kids' elementary school—Seattle Public School System—there is a huge emphasis on reading, on "read to succeed" programs, book sales, book clubs, etc. It is "in" to be a reader, to be a book worm—even for boys. My ten year old is probably a pretty average reader, but he's read many, many more books, of better quality, than I ever did at his age. Does this emphasis still taper off as they get older? Maybe. But I think the quality of children's books is improving steadily, and that goes for the YA genre as well. And I see that the parents and teachers who are so involved on the elementary school level are gradually, slowly but surely, moving into the middle schools and making a huge influence.

DG: I'm seeing that, too. It's very encouraging.

RP: Anyway, another of my fears is that my books won't be taken seriously because they don't deal so much with Traumatic & Sensationalistic Issues. As if the only way a book can really be Important is only if it deals with some big traumatic

issue, preferably one that a teacher can "use" in some curriculum unit on X—X being rape, child abuse, racism, or whatever. These issues are important, but I don't think they're the main purpose of fiction. I think these issue-oriented books become dated pretty quickly. I'm also tired of the term "edgy." What was "edgy" in 1990 is now comically dated.

I like books about people, not about issues. Those are the books I care about writing. I like to write about issues that are timeless. I hate books that have a message. Hate hate hate hate hate them. Is it just my imagination, or do there seem to be more of these in YA literature than any other genre? I don't know how many YA books I have picked up, read the first chapter, smelled a message coming, and put it down. (Maybe the people who wrote those books have been spending too much time doing school visits.)

But this whole question of the YA genre, that's sort of an underlying problem/fear. Will it ever be clarified and understood? Will places like Barnes & Noble ever figure it out? It is the least understood genre. It sometimes seems that every other genre—from picture books to sci-fi to whodunits to true

crime—gets more respect than YA fiction. It sort of makes me mad—which is maybe the flip side of fear, I don't know.

Every time I'm between books, I spend a lot of time asking myself, Why am I doing this? What's the point? Do we really need another book? I mean, why am I spending this time away from my family, sitting on my butt, drinking coffee, enclosed in my room, when I should be doing something with my wife and kids or working on the house, or exercising, or volunteering in the community, etc., etc. Maybe my greatest fear is that one day I won't be able to answer that question: why am I doing this? Maybe one day I simply won't care anymore about making a book. Or maybe I'll look back on it all and think, what a waste. I doubt that'll happen, though. And really, I guess my nature is to not worry too much about those things.

DG: And so you continue to write because . . . ?

RP: I think we write because we love books and want to pay homage to that love of books by making our own book. And we love the process, the work itself. That's usually the answer that keeps me going. Love of books, love of the work. I think the values and rewards of writing are mostly intrinsic.

*Don Gallo notes: You can read more of this interview by going to [Authors4Teens.com](http://Authors4Teens.com) on the World Wide Web, where you will also find interviews with a number of other notable authors, including Chris Crutcher, Joan Bauer, Robert Lipsyte, Laurie Halse Anderson, Jerry Spinelli, Nancy Garden, William Sleator, and Sarah Dessen.*

*Although access to the site is by subscription only, a 30-day free trial offer is available.*

Books by Randy Powell, each published by Farrar Straus & Giroux:

*Run if You Dare*, 2001.

*Is Kissing a Girl Who Smokes Like Licking an Ashtray?* 1992,  
an ALA Best Books for Young Adults book

*Dean Duffy*, 1998, an ALA Best Books for Young Adults  
book

*Tribute to Another Dead Rock Star*, 1999, an ALA Best Books  
for Young Adults book

Published by Sunburst:

*The Whistling Toilet*, 2001.

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Readers can contact Powell at his Website,  
[www.randypowell.com](http://www.randypowell.com).

