

Reading Zone 13.1

Read the following passage and then answer the questions that follow. You can check your answers on page 249.

Don't think: write!

When we write, for whom do we write? Or as we would be more likely to ask, who do we write for? It sounds like an easy question to answer, and in some ways it is. But when it is applied to the matter of fiction, the logical answer—that we write for a specific audience—doesn't always work.

Each year I teach at one or more writers' workshops. I enjoy them for many reasons, not the least of which is the opportunity to meet other workshop leaders, often writers whose work I have long admired. Writing is a solitary profession, and a writers' conference gives us a chance to get together. Another reason I enjoy the workshops is that I am forced to articulate what I have learned about the techniques of the craft of fiction writing; it is easy to get forgetful and sloppy. Having to explain imagery, simile, metaphor, point of view, is a way to continue to teach myself as well as the people who have come to the workshop.

At one workshop, I talked, as usual, about all the hard work that precedes the writing of fiction. Often there is research to be done. For my Time Trilogy I had to immerse myself in the new physics: first, Einstein's theories of relativity and Planck's quantum theory for *A Wrinkle in Time*; then cellular biology and particle physics for *A Wind in the Door*; and astrophysics and non-linear theories of time for *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*. For *The Love Letters* I had to learn a great deal more about seventeenth-century Portuguese history than I needed or wanted to know, so that the small amount needed for the book would be accurate. Before, during, and after research, the writer needs to be thinking constantly about the characters, and the direction in which the novel seems to be moving.

Does the story have the Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end? How do the events of the novel relate to me, personally, in my own journey through life? What are my own

particular concerns at the time of writing, and how should they affect—or not affect—the story? When I actually sit down to write, I stop thinking. While I am writing, I am listening to the story; I am not listening to myself. “But,” a young woman in the class said in a horrified tone of voice, “my creative writing teacher says that we must keep the audience in mind at all times.” That is undoubtedly true for the scientists writing an article that is expected to be understood by people who have little or no scientific background. The writer will have to keep simplifying scientific language, explaining technical terms. Keeping the audience in mind is probably valuable for reporting in newspapers and magazines. The reporter is writing for the average reader; language should be neither so bland as to be insulting, nor so technical as to demand special knowledge.

As for lawyers, I assume they have each other in mind at all times as they write. Certainly they don’t have most of us in mind. Their grandiosity appalls me. In a movie contract, I was asked to grant the rights to my book to the producers, in perpetuity, throughout the universe. When I wrote in, “With the exception of Sagittarius and the Andromeda galaxy,” it was accepted. Evidently the lawyers, who are writing to avoid litigation in a litigious world, did not anticipate a lawsuit from Sagittarius. Of course I am being grossly unfair to many lawyers; I come from a family of fine lawyers. But the language used in a will or a contract is indeed a special language, and it is not aimed at the reader who enjoys stories, the reader of fiction.

Whom, then, does the writer of fiction write for? It is only a partial truth to say that I write for myself, out of my own need, asking, whether I realize it or not, the questions I am asking in my own life. A truer answer is that I write for the book. “But why do you write for children?” I am often asked. And I answer truthfully that I don’t. I haven’t been a child for a long time, and if what I write doesn’t appeal to me, at my age, it isn’t likely to appeal to a child. I hope I will never lose the child within me, who has not lost her sense of wonder, of awe, of laughter. But I am not a child; I am a grown woman, learning about maturity as I move on in chronology.

A teacher, in introducing me to a class of seventh graders, said, “Miss L’Engle has made it in the children’s field, and she is now trying to break into the adult market.” I felt that I had better not explain to this teacher that I had no desire to break into the adult market and see my fiction in “adult bookstores.”...I did explain that my first several books were regular trade novels, which means that they were marketed for a general audience, not for children. And I explained that when I have a book that I think will be too difficult for a general audience, then we will market it as a juvenile book. It is a great mistake to think that children are not capable of understanding difficult concepts in science or philosophy.

A book that has a young protagonist will likely be marketed as a children’s book, regardless of content. Since adolescents are usually more willing than their elders to ask difficult questions, and to accept the fact that the questions don’t have nice, tidy answers but lead on to more difficult questions, approximately half of my books have young protagonists. But while I am writing, I am not thinking of any audience at all. I am not even thinking about myself. I am thinking about the book. This does not imply anything esoteric. I do not pick up the pen and expect it to guide my hand, or put my fingers on the keyboard of the typewriter and expect the work to be done automatically. It is work. But it is focused work, and the focus is on the story, not on anything else. An example of the kind of focus I mean is a good doctor. The good doctor listens to the patient, truly listens, to what the patient says, does not say, is afraid to say, to body language, to everything that may give a clue as to what is wrong. The good doctor is so fully focused on the patient that personal self-consciousness has vanished. Such focused listening does not make the doctor—or any of the rest of us—less ourselves. In fact, such focused listening makes us more ourselves.

The same thing is true in listening to a story as we write it. It does not make us any less writers, this strange fact that we do not think about writing as we are writing; it makes us more writers.

1. What profession does the author of the passage liken to being a good writer?
 - (A) Lawyer
 - (B) Astronaut
 - (C) Therapist
 - (D) Doctor
 - (E) Physicist

2. Which of the following adjectives does the author use to characterize the profession of writing?
 - (A) Rigid
 - (B) Solitary
 - (C) Childish
 - (D) Noble
 - (E) Sloppy

3. A book written by the author of the passage is called
 - (A) *A Wrinkle in Space*
 - (B) *The Wind in Time*
 - (C) *A Door in Time*
 - (D) *A Swiftly Tilting Universe*
 - (E) *The Love Letters*

4. As defined in the passage, a “trade novel” is
 - (A) one specifically written for children
 - (B) one written for a specific trade
 - (C) one marketed for children
 - (D) one marketed for a specific trade
 - (E) one marketed for a general audience

5. According to the passage, all of the following are things the author explains to her creative writing classes EXCEPT
- (A) simile
 - (B) metaphor
 - (C) imagery
 - (D) resonance
 - (E) point of view
6. The author has had to resist the label of being a(n)
- (A) children's author
 - (B) adult author
 - (C) trade author
 - (D) popular author
 - (E) esoteric author
7. The author would most likely DISAGREE with which of the following statements?
- (A) Writing should be performed with the work in mind, not the audience.
 - (B) Teaching writing can be a valuable experience for the teacher.
 - (C) Young protagonists are often mistakenly viewed as childish.
 - (D) Difficult concepts should be written about with adults in mind, not children.
 - (E) When one is writing well, the work will be focused.
8. Her annotation of the contract selling her rights, excluding those rights in Sagittarius and the Andromeda Galaxy, was meant to be
- (A) detached
 - (B) ironic
 - (C) angered
 - (D) political
 - (E) sophomoric

9. For whom does the author write?
- (A) The work
 - (B) Her audience
 - (C) Her protagonists
 - (D) Her children
 - (E) Children of all countries
10. Which of the following summarizes the main point of the passage?
- (A) Work that contains children should not be assumed to be juvenile literature.
 - (B) Whereas certain types of writers write for an audience, the fiction writer should write for the work.
 - (C) Whereas certain types of writers write for an audience, the journalistic writer should write for the work.
 - (D) Whereas certain doctors who listen are good, so are certain writers who listen to the story in their heads.
 - (E) To assume that writing is an easy task is false.