

Interview with Heather – transcribed notes

I've always loved physics - I love understanding how the world works. I really, really love that.

And so I have a masters in physics, I left before getting my PHD because I realized that it wasn't the right work environment for me, and I don't regret leaving because I've gotten to do some other great things.

From there I went to work at a science museum, and I got to teach physics in an informal setting, so not with tests, but with really fun demonstrations and experiments.

So that was a lot of fun.

Again, I bet science teachers would love it if they got a job where they were just teaching fun science without worrying about grades or anything.

And I have been interested in writing since elementary school, but it was one of those things where everybody tells you "don't quit your day job."

But so I guess I did, I quit my day job. I had a daughter who was 2 who I could tell needed more time from me, we later learned (many years later) she had Asperger's.

I wasn't sure what was up at the time, we just knew that life was hard for her so I decided that I would quit work for a few years to stay home and give our two young daughters the time and attention they needed.

And that would also give me the chance to go and study writing.

So I took classes on writing, the thing you have to know is that I approached writing the way I approached physics, which is that you can't just understand the world without reading all about it.

So I felt like I couldn't just start writing, I needed to read all about it, and the first book that I read was Stephen King's "On Writing" which is kind of half memoir and half how-to. And the first thing that he said to do was to read books on grammar.

So actually before I left the museum, but when I knew I was interested in writing, but before I'd left or had really thought about leaving, I started reading grammar books.

So without telling anyone really that I wanted to write, (only my sister knew, she and I both had a pact to try our hand at writing)

So I would, my bedtime reading material was grammar books, and I went through several, and said, "Ok, I know how to put a sentence together, so surely it must be okay to go out and get books on writing."

Oh, I have to tell you when I was in graduate school I got books on writing and I didn't tell anybody, because when you're a physics student you didn't tell people you wanted to write for children.

So I went out and got books from a library about writing for children and I kind of I'd hide them in my room.

3:19

So actually while I was in graduate school I was still at the same time studying, and I made this list of ten things I wanted to do before I died and that was one of them, to write a children's book.

So flip back to like 2005 I started taking online writing classes cause I was told it was too hard to take classes at a university level in creative writing without being a full time student.

So I took online classes and I read lots and lots of books on writing... I read general ones, and then I went to like one chapter was on dialogue and one chapter was on POV, then I started just getting a book that was only about dialogue and a book that was only about

And at the same time I kept writing and kept writing so that I felt like my writing would improve maybe as I was learning.

I've always been fascinated with the craft of writing - not just writing whatever I wanted to write but writing it in such a way that it would really appeal to readers.

So I started attending a monthly critique group and I realized that I quickly became someone who I think I was both loved and feared, or something, or my feedback, because I didn't just say "oh, it's lovely, I love it" I would actually offer feedback for suggestions for change and I had a woman one time who sounded like she didn't want me I don't know I didn't get the impression she didn't want my feedback and at the end everyone had given feedback and she was like "what about you"

5:11

"you've got to give me advice too"
and I was like "I thought you didn't want it"
and she was like, "yes, I want it"

So the big change came when I was doing it for friends I helped a friend of mine with her novel and she credits that to why she got an agent and then got it published.

But the big change occurred, **my lucky break**, or whatever you call it, when Julianna Baggott knew I was writing and **she asked if I would read a novel for her**. **She said we could do a swap - she'd read mine and I'd read hers.**

So I was kind of hung up on mine at the time I wanted to make some changes to the plot and I didn't know what I wanted to do with it so I took her novel and I read it and I gave her feedback **and she said you did this so well I think you should do it for a living, I think you should charge people.**

So she started handing my name out when people would ask her, and she'd say I'm too busy I don't do edits but I know someone who can.

So that's kind of how I came into the world of editing was because of her saying I should give it a try and the it's really just happened word of mouth.

I do very little advertising, as a matter of fact I actually do not explicitly advertise, especially at this point, and about 2/3 of my clients are returning clients.

So um it's not just that I don't have to it's that I can make sure the people who are working with me are people who really want the level of feedback I give.

I did have kind of a negative experience with someone recently who as it turned out didn't really want any feedback and so luckily we didn't sign an agreement, didn't move forward because it quickly became apparent...

Summer 2012 I was thinking about...so people said what you're really good at is explaining the craft of writing and you ought to do some writing classes, some like workshops, and I felt really intimidated by the idea of offering writer's workshops because I don't have like an MFA in creative writing, so who was I to tell other people?

But the thing about writing is that you can learn so much just by studying and really applying yourself and what's taught in universities isn't always stuff that's going to be helpful for that...

So I remember I went to see my sister and she was the one, just like Julianna was the one to convince me to do editing, my sister was the one who convinced me that yes, I really should try offering some classes

So I offered a series of three classes over the summer, summer of 2012.

There were two different times you could attend, but three classes over the summer I offered and it was limited to like 6 or 8 people.

And at the end of those, they went pretty well, and at the end the people who had come to them I said how would you like to be part of a moderated writers group?

And so we started off learning about storyboards, so with the one group that met at night every single person stayed on and we had a group of 9 people so we met for like a year and a half, with me first doing a storyboard and then offering classes and encouraging people to bring their work each week and share.

And then I have to say with that group it was half therapy, there were a lot of people writing memoir and writing is a great way to work through things that have happened to you in your past, it really is.

And I felt so honored to be able to work with them, and for these amazing women to open up and share their stories with me it was such an honor.

So even though we don't meet as a critique group anymore, we still get together like once a month, and we'll be friends forever now, we've shared so much.

And so from there I've gone on to teach for Olly, which is the group at FSU.

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

They offer classes for people, I think they suggest 50 and up, and I have taught now spring 2014 fall 2014 and again now and I'm teaching two new classes this spring.

So those are a lot of fun. The people who come to them are usually retired, they have time on their hands, and they want to explore things they didn't get to do during their life that they were interested in.

So it's just a great group of people to work with.

11:45

I believe that children's literature is more important than any other area of literature, the literature that we read when we're of that age where we can start to read on our own, I think it helps transform us, and it makes us who we are, and so I wanted to write transformative children's literature.

It was books like *The Giver* and *Ender's Game* that really affected me, even though, interestingly enough, I read those both in my ear 20s but they were still I felt like they still kind of shaped me and affected me and I wanted to write the kinds of books that would influence children that would kind of I don't know not just escapism literature, which is fun, you're a kid and you can't get in a car and drive wherever you want, but you can go wherever you want in a book.

I really do think children's lit is the most noble thing to me.

It drives me crazy when I hear people talk about it as "oh, well if you can't write for adults, write for kids" and I'm like, are you kidding? because writing for kids is so much harder because you've got an adult perspective so to write in a way that's

interesting and that kids can identify with maybe you have to have an arrested development

And maybe they have more time on their hands but also I think adults just don't realize when an adult writes for kids they write from the perspective of an adult looking back on their childhood and so it doesn't always resonate with today's kids

It's purpose for me - **it is my way of dealing with the way I feel about the evil things people do**

And when I write I have to put myself in the shoes of the villains, I have to truly understand who they are and what they're doing, and when I can understand why someone can do these horrible things to other people and they think they're doing what's right it helps me to find peace for myself with the world and being able to accept the whole things that people do

I went through a depression when I was in 8th grade and stemming from just wars that were going on in the world and learning about the horrible things that people do and not being able to understand any of it not understanding how people could hurt each other and be so selfish

and so I think that I'm still working through that disillusionment and I'm understanding that it's not so simple - someone who does bad things is not necessarily a bad person - that's my therapy in it - that's why I like flawed protagonists and honorable villains

We turn villains we villainize people who don't believe the same things we believe, whether its like the country or religion or socioeconomic class people make all these assumptions and we'll villainize people without trying to understand where they're coming from

16:45

I would say that what's probably the hardest but also the most satisfying its **when I can figure out how to offer someone feedback** because **what you're doing is you're taking their baby and you're telling them what's wrong with it**, and when you can do it in such a way, I dread it, every single manuscript I take on the angst of the writer, I worry with them that they'll never get this story published, I worry with them that they're not going to be able to fix the problem, and I give them my best feedback and when that author is able to take my suggestions and it makes them feel better about my story, it gives them great ideas on how to improve it, that's the greatest reward

I do love writing, and that's like a whole different kind of wonderful selfish reward but helping an author it's such I really do worry and worry and worry about it and I worry as I send off the editorial letter and I worry as I send off the manuscript and I worry and wait and dread and hear from them and when they say oh this is so

actually what usually happens is they feel overwhelmed they go through all the comments, they feel like they've been beaten up, and then we talk on the phone and I explain my suggestions and we go through my ideas on how they might correct some of the problems and then afterward they almost always feel reinvigorated and motivated, and that's my favorite

or when someone calls me and tells me that their book sold, it's stuff like that is awesome

different people take it differently, and so most people can take it pretty well but you don't know how the person's going to react until after you give them feedback

and you know what, whether the person is brand new or whether the person has published multiple books does not tell you who's the most sensitive

so it's not that simple - sometimes you might upset someone who you think is thick-skinned and they're not

on a typical manuscript, there might be like 1000 marks on a manuscript now you understand why it can be overwhelming to them

cause every manuscript is different and has a different set of problems so um first I'll tell you that one of the biggest challenges is that as I read I have to keep my mind open to everything from like grammatical copy errors to like line-level problems where someone hasn't been transitioned well or the sentence is confusing going from that to something that's a little more global like is a character speaking/acting consistently

and then can you see what the characters want, is the story actually advancing each scene - is each scene doing work, all the way up to like the global the arc of the whole story and the characters arc
20:20

I have to try and keep all of that in my head at the same time, with every sentence that I read, I'm looking at it on the word/line/paragraph/scene/story level the whole time and that

I think I'm keeping my brain young cause they say challenging topics like that really keeps your brain young

but because each story has its own unique set of problems, it's not there's no cookie cutter you start all over from scratch and you know there are times when I think I'm not going to be able to offer them the suggestions, when i see what's wrong, but I'm not gonna be able to offer suggestions on how to fix it and that can be overwhelming

it can be really intense trying to give people but if I if I'm in the right frame of mind the ideas just come to me and I will say I don't think that's a craft part I think that's just a gift that I'm lucky to have

whatever it is, but being able to come up with solutions and some of it is probably studying and seeing lots of stories

to have an idea of how you could add more tension to a scene or how you could make a character more layered

the ideas just kind of come to me, so yeah, I'm gonna say that's the part I'm really lucky about because if they didn't, I don't think I'd be nearly as popular with my authors

if its grammar and that kind of stuff I tell people when they're done with their final edits that then they should send it to a copyeditor to catch those kinds of mistakes, because even I'll catch a lot of them, but I'm not a copyeditor so I'm not gonna catch all of them but even so they're gonna go back and make changes so someone else needs to be going back and looking for that at the final edit

23:05

but I have to look for everything at once, because once I have read it, you don't read it the same way. You don't have fresh eyes, you already know what's going to happen, so a sentence that might have been confusing before now won't be confusing

so yeah I only do one read. if I try to read a manuscript more than once, like I've had someone for several people now I've had it where they have me read the manuscript and then make changes and they might come back to me later and say "ok, the agent said this, can you help me, can you read it again, I've made changes to the plot"

and so I've done that to probably about four manuscripts now, five maybe, I can never give as good of an edit the second time around because I already know the characters, so I can't tell you, are your characters really revealing themselves for someone who's never seen the story before

are the clues laid out? once you know the clues are, it's a mystery, they're gonna stand out to you

so things like that the less that I know about the story the better, before I read it so I can really read it with fresh eyes

I do not like to mix. if I had my perfect world, I'd read one, write up the editorial letter, and then meet with that author before I started the next one but sometimes when I send off the manuscript sometimes the person wants to look at it for like a week or two before they talk so in that case I may be halfway through

another manuscript so that's hard I have to stop and go back and read through the editorial letter

the editorial letter that I write for people is really, really extensive
I don't think I know anyone who writes them the way I do
24:59

so then I have its broken down into multiple parts the first part is the main suggestions

first what I have is my main suggestions so anywhere from like 4-8 things that I think are the most important because I don't expect you to make every change or focus on everything, so it's like here's your top priority in my opinion

then from there I'll go on to general suggestions, or my general comments that will cover world building, dialogue, character development, plot development, pacing, descriptions, setting, it covers basically everything, common grammatical errors, how well you're connecting the reader

so basically there's like 20 different things that would go under there

and then after that if you've paid for, people who pay for like the not just the overall read but have paid for more detailed, then I have like the chapter specific comments where I list my comments per chapter (the big comments)

that's kind of where that goes hand in hand with the comments in the manuscript in addition to that I sometimes include a list of suggested exercises

I might suggest if the story doesn't feel focused they do the logline exercise

so I may have anywhere between 2-5 exercises that I tack on to the end of that

without the exercises at the end the editorial letter itself is usually between somewhere around 12-24 pages

the one that I just did for the woman who was really happy who I was afraid was going to be overwhelmed it was 24 pages

but I thought she had a good sense of story, so I pushed her more than I do usually

the thing is I don't give everyone the same edit

this is something really important as an editor - you can't grade everyone the same way so to speak - you have to just take them at whatever level they're at and try to bring them up one level and even though I am my attention is focused on the manuscript it's really not about can I make this manuscript better it's really can I help the writer become a better writer and the way you become a better writer is by fixing the manuscript

so you improve the manuscript, you improve your skills as a writer
but at the end of the day you may never publish that book but you are now a better
writer than you were before and that's the one thing you have control over so that's
what I try to focus on when I speak with them is please don't fix this in this one
book, now do it this way in all your books

but then what will happen so let's say d came to me and
now I held him to a higher level
things I let fly before, now I'm going to be more nitpicky
ok, so you can make the dialogue even stronger
so my trick is to give everybody what I think of as enough feedback to help them
step up one level

I felt like her story idea and the way that she told the story I thought worked - she
had a good sense of what creates a feeling of conflict for the reader - the writing was
more like the writing of someone who hasn't been writing for very long

it wasn't strong writing
a lot more comments on to try to help her have a stronger voice to use more active
writing
and things like that I wouldn't have normally been as nitpicky about

what I find is that sometimes people who are really good writers and they're writing
is so beautiful

but so plot is really hard for them and its just this foreign beast
what I find is quite often people who are really good at plotting

the person who can get both of those is the person who can sell a lot of books
there's no reason you can't have both, it just takes more effort and you have to be
willing to its time
to be an author and actually make a living you have to let go at some point of how
well its written or how well its plotted because its that law of diminishing returns

and that's what I tell people with editing too is that especially if they want to send
something to me repeated times is that I won't be able to help them as much with
each additional read its harder for me to offer feedback

it is extremely hard, and as much as I love editing, it's really hard for me when I'm
writing because I constantly have this editor voice in the back of my head that says
things like, is that gonna work with the overall plot? is the character acting
consistently? and you can't do that when you're writing you have to just let the story
out because if you do anything to squash your creativity you're not gonna have a
good story

so I battle with that every day, as a matter of fact, I'd say that I am so inhibited now because of editing that maybe I may not be able to be an author as long as I'm an editor

yes, it's hard but the thing is that the editing brings me it brings an income its not just that it brings me a sense of accomplishment that I can measure so it feels good that I'm helping people when I like see a book that I edited win a reward, there's a real I get listed in all these acknowledgements and I feel like I'm always the bridesmaid and never the bride but so I'm glad I've been able to help so many writers, I really feel good about that and I feel like it's a permanent help because now they're a better writer and even if they never come back to me I've permanently helped them

I do wish I could turn off my internal editor and just write my own stuff, because I come up with some really kick-ass stories

it doesn't mean that the book would be the idea is really good you shouldn't tell anybody cause they might steal it I know they are because I read enough to know but there's so much more than that voice is most important as far as whether or not you keep a reader

but its all in the delivery