
An Interview with Lois Lowry, 1994 Newbery Medal Winner

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An interview with Lois Lowry, 1994 Newbery Medal winner

Lois Lowry first won the Newbery Medal in 1990 for her book Number the Stars. She spoke with RT associate editors Judy Hendershot and Jackie Peck about this year's winner The Giver and the background for its writing.

THE READING TEACHER: *The Giver, your second Newbery award-winning book in 4 years, is an unusual story. Did you draw from your own life for any of its elements?*

LOWRY: Somewhat, yes. This book was beginning when my mother was clearly at the end of her life, and at that time what she wanted to do was tell me her history. During the course of those many months, I began to think on a subliminal level of the importance for people to pass along their memories to the next generation.

There was also something else happening at the same time. I was traveling a great deal, and I would wake up in a hotel room that looked like all other hotel rooms. For a moment I wouldn't remember where I was. Then I would look out of the window and that was the same too. Every place looked alike. It was that sameness about things that I depicted in *The Giver*.

RT: *The picture on the book's dust jacket is an intriguing one. Is the man someone you know?*

LOWRY: I took that photograph in 1979 while I was working for a magazine which sent me to interview and photograph this man, a painter. While I wrote about him, we talked about color and form, perspective and composition of painting. I've always felt that I have a good visual sense, but it became clear to me that he saw things that I didn't. I was grateful because he enabled me to see things differently. That aspect of someone giving me color went into the writing of the book.

RT: *Was the image of the painter's face with you as you wrote?*

LOWRY: I think it probably was. I'd kept this particular photograph through many moves, and it has often hung above my desk. The painter died some years after I photographed and interviewed him, and during the last 5 years of his life he was blind. That element also went into the writing of *The Giver* in a subconscious way—the fact that he went blind—lost it all, after all he had given the world.

RT: *Were you always a writer and a reader, even as a child?*

LOWRY: When I went to school, there was no creative writing. In fact there was no library at my school and there were no books, so I had to sort of find my way on my own. When I vis-

it schools today, the child I used to be envies children of today and their school experiences. For me school was something that I did to learn certain things. My real life as a reader and a writer took place at home.

RT: *Tell us about your life as a writer, how you work.*

LOWRY: I'm sort of a cautionary tale. Teachers would not want kids to know how I go about writing. It's sort of haphazard. I write on a computer, and I go to work every day when I'm at home.

Before I ever sit down to write a book, I spend a lot of time going over it in my head. I don't make notes. When I start writing, I go all the way through a story from the beginning. Each day I may go back and change a few things I wrote the day before, but I don't do extensive rewriting. What I end up with is an entire book that I've made up on the spot, and I do it very quickly, maybe in a 4-week period of time.

Then I think that I'm finished, and I give the story to the publisher only to discover that I'm not finished at all. Editors give it back to me with suggestions and questions that the story has raised in their minds. It is at that point that I realize that I've left things unanswered that need to be dealt with more thoroughly, and I rewrite it.

RT: *Do you share your work while it is in progress?*

LOWRY: I don't show a story to anyone while I'm working on it, so I don't get any input until it's finished. For me, writing is a solitary kind of thing. I don't necessarily think it should be so; it's just my nature. I'm an introvert, and I think if I shared a book while it was in the process, it would be very distracting.

RT: *Is there a way you envision *The Giver* being used in a literature classroom?*

LOWRY: I am hearing from junior high teachers primarily, but not exclusively, and they are telling me that they've never before had a book that promotes discussion in the way this book does. That seems very exhilarating for that age group of kids. I've not been privy to the way teachers use, guide, or direct this book, but I gather that it's used in connection with making choices, and that's not surprising. The book really does seduce the read-

er early on because it sounds like a neat way to live.

RT: *Do you have suggestions of your own for using the book?*

LOWRY: I feel that teachers know much more than I do. I've never been a teacher, and I am so in awe of the skills and knowledge they bring to their students. I do think that there is an important analogy that can be drawn from *The Giver*. Teachers, parents, and librarians become the givers of knowledge that children will carry with themselves on whatever journey they take in life.

RT: *Do you have a favorite book of your own?*

LOWRY: I answer that differently from time to time. One of them is *Rabble Starkey*, and the other is *Autumn Street*. Perhaps it's not surprising that both of those are introspective.

RT: *Are you at work on a new book?*

LOWRY: Ordinarily by the time a book is published, I'm already at work on the next one, but I've not written another book since *The Giver* because I've been caught up in traveling and the book's promotion. So after the end of the summer, I'm going to be at home with a new puppy that I'm acquiring, and I will be starting another book.

When I visit schools today, the child I used to be envies children of today and their school experiences.

As I told you, books start in my head long before I start them on my computer. I do have something going around in my head, but I don't want to talk about it too much.

I will say that I've been haunted in recent weeks and months by the memory of a photograph that is still with my mother's things that need to be gone through. It is a picture of my mother and her brother as children. They are walking a country road. It's a photograph of their family in the early part of this century. Somewhere in that photograph is a book. That's what's in my mind right now, but first I've got to go and find that photograph.