

Dear Author—My Teacher Is Making Me Write This

by Lois Duncan

This morning I went to the mailbox and extracted two magazines, three pieces of business mail, two ads, four bills, a notice that my son is flunking World History, and 37 “letters from readers.”

Today is Thursday. Thursday is what I think of an average mail day. Tuesday is a light mail day, because letters arrive on Tuesdays were mailed on the weekend. Monday’s mail is heavy because, with the lack of a Sunday delivery, two days’ worth comes in one time.

I realize that 37 is not many letters compared to Judy’s Blume’s fabled daily truckload, but the number is sufficient to fill me with both delight and dismay. I’m delighted that 37 children took the time to write me; I’m dismayed when I contemplate the problems I will face when I answer them.

These problems, shared by all authors of books for young people, fall into several categories.

Financial Expense

Of today’s 37 letters, only four were accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. These four all came from the same junior high in Garland, Texas, a school from which I receive a great deal of mail. I have never met the teacher of the students who write from Garland, but I’m sure if I ever do, I’ll know her by her halo.

Few publishers are willing to absorb the expensive involved in answering “fan mail,” and it mounts quickly. At eight cents per envelope and twenty-two cents per stamp, the cost of responding to relatively small number of letter I receive comes to about \$11.00 per day, \$66.60 per week or \$3463.20 per year. The thought of what Judy Blume must fork out for postage is mind boggling.

Addressing envelopes can be costly in another way, because of the time it steals from a writer’s workday. On an average day, I spent between one and two hours responding to reader-mail, and in November and May, when kids are rushing to complete overdue assignments before the semester ends, I spend a lot more than that. When pre-addressed envelopes are enclosed with readers’ letters, it cuts down greatly on the time-consuming paperwork.

Mailing Addresses

When letters are not accompanied self-addressed envelopes, I answer them anyway—or at least, I try to. Sometimes, however, this does not turn out to be possible. In today’s batch of mail, there were six letters with return addresses that their names and addresses that were illegible. If

children were encouraged to *print* their names and addresses on the envelopes instead of write them in cursive, there would be fewer disappointed young correspondents gazing into empty mailboxes.

From their postmarks, it was evident that seven of the letters I received today were mailed over three months ago. Their writers must long ago have given up hope of receiving replies. Actually, it's a miracle those letters reached me at all, as they were sent to a house we moved from when I became pregnant with my fifth child, (now a freshman in high school). Occasionally, out of the kindness of my heart, the current occupant read-dresses my mail, but most of the time, she chucks it, and who can blame her? Sixteen years is a long time to play Good Samaritan.

Contents

I can safely predict that 99 percent of the letters I receive will contain one or more of the following:

1. Praise for having written another author's book, usually Richard Peck's *Are You In the House Alone?*
2. A query about the state of my finances. (*Tony*: "How much money do you make? Are you paid by the day, by the month, by the year, or what?")
3. Concern for my health. (*Allison*: "I have read many reports about writers who become alcoholiks because of the frustrasions it brings on. I hope this is not true. Are you an alcoholik?")
4. Some background information about themselves. (*Kelly*: "I was born in Colorado except I forgot which hospital but I know that my grandpa had open-heart surgery in it.")
5. A request for a photograph. (*Quinn*: "I won't mind if you turn out to be ugly, because beauty is only skin deep.")
6. A request for advice. (*Beth Ellen*: "My grades have been dropping rapidly like from an A- to C-. Can you give me an explanation? Do you think the reason could be I haven't been wearing my glasses? I also have a boy on my mind. Do you think that could bring my grades down? S.O.S.!")
7. A positive comment about one of my books. (*LaLainya*: "It's 3:41 a.m., but I feel the need to write to you, as I still have tears in my eyes after reading *Killing Mr. Griffin*. Once I started reading, I couldn't put it down.")
8. A negative comment about one of my books. (*Dutch*: "I am writing to tell you I hate your story, *Stranger With My Face*, mainly because I was forced to read it in a short time against my will. The teacher told me to read the story is also making me write this

letter.”)

9. A request for a sequel. (*Jennie*: “I just read *Ransom*. I feel like I am love in Dexter. The way Jess was firm with him and made him trust her was so wonderful. I was also happy when she kissed him! If you would write a second part to that book I would go out of my mind with job....P.S. I am a girl.”)

Requests for Information That Easily Can Be Obtained from Other Sources

Here are some questions that arrived today: “Are you married and do you have children?” (asked in 14 letters.) “How old are you?” (in eight letters.) “What was the first book you ever wrote?” (in six letters.) “How many books have you written and what are the titles? (in 22 letters.). In many cases, answers to such queries are demanded by return mail, because “my report is due by the end of the week, and if I don’t hear from you by then, I’ll get an *F*.” On occasion, I am requested to respond by Express Mail.

This sort of basic information can be found in such publications as *Something About the Author*, *The Writer’s Directory*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Who’s Who of American Women*, and the *Dictionary of International of International Biography*. There are also many autobiographies available that have been written by children’s authors. In my own case, my book, *Chapters: My Growth as a Writer*, is in many school libraries, and “A Visit With Lois Duncan,” an 18-minute videotape designed for classroom use, may be obtained at a very low price from the producer (RDA Enterprises), from the Listening Library, or—as the last resort—directly from me. I can see no reason why children old enough to be asked to write author reports should not be expected to do the research on their own.

A Demand for Material Goods

When accepting the Newberry Medal for *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, Beverly Cleary expressed concern that the “Me Generation” may have given birth to the “Gimme Generation”. My own experiences as an author tend to confirm this. In letters I have recently received, I have been asked for items of clothing—(“Whatever it is you wear when you’re writing.”); money for worthy causes such as new carpet for the school library or a VCR for the classroom; and prizes for book fairs—(“Something you use in your work, like an old typewriter or computer maybe.”)

And, of course, *books!* (“Please, send me autograph copies of every book you’ve written.”) It’s apparent that many children are under the impression that writers get books free and are eager to pass them along to anyone who wants them. It would be nice that if that were the case, but, regrettably, it isn’t. It is written into most contracts that authors will receive ten complimentary copies of their books, and if they want, more will be required to purchase them.

The Expectation That They Will Receive Personal Replies

Some teachers become more incensed than their students when the author replies to reader mail in a form letter. "If a child has one to the trouble of sending a personal, handwritten letter, why shouldn't the recipient be courteous enough to response in kind?" one teacher wrote me.

The answer, of course, is that there's a limit to how many letters a person can write while engaged in the lengthy process of creating a book. One day would be easy enough. Two, perhaps. Maybe three. But 37? Even though my mail load is comparatively small, because I write mainly for older children, there would be no way I could write that many letters and still get work done. And what about authors like Paula Danzinger and James Howe, who write for children who are of an age to be in "letter writing" classes? They would be responding to letters 24 hours a day and would never be able to give us *Divorce Expression* or *Bunnacula*.

Like many children's authors, I send a form letter which I update date several times a year. This provides most of the routine information children ask for—"I started writing at 10...I sold my first story at 13....Yes, I get a lot of my story ideas from my children....I wrote on a word processor...My hobby is photography.") There's a photo in the top left corner, which I also update regularly, and space at the bottom in which I add personal notes so my pen pals will realize I really read their letters.

Which, in fact, I *do*. I read every letter I get. The second most important man in my life is our postman. Some letters make me laugh; some make me cry; some shock me; some puzzle me; some amaze me. And there are some that, for various reasons, I *do* answer personally, because I cannot bear not to.

For your delight, here are a few of those:

I want to be a writer, but my problem is my stories are so serious and deary. Every time I go to write a story it gets deeper and deeper and then I got so seep it's hard to find a descent ending. I'm only 13, but if you read my poems or stories you would think I'm either 99 or the most unhappiest person in the world, which I'm not at all. Were you ever like that?

Yours Truly,
Sarah

Do you ever get sad after reading a good book? I do. Do you know why? It's because I know I'll never read a good book as good as that one again. I don't mean that when I get finished with that book that no book could ever match it. What I mean I is that I'll never read a book just like that one again. Do you understand?

Love,
Laura

I am writing to find out more about being an author. I hope someday to write, not just short

stories for my teachers, but books that deserve to be published. I don't have a lot of thoughts stacked together before I write a story. Did you when you were my age? I'm always afraid I will copy someone's idea for writing a story. That would be so terrible.

How can you stick to a certain thought through the whole time you are writing? Do you use more than one theme in your books? How do you organize a plot, a really great one, that gets more exciting as it goes along? There is so much I need to learn to do my job right!

I'm sure you get many letters exactly like this one, so I will understand if you don't response. But I hope you will.

Sincerely,
Heidi

P.S. I am nine years old.

Lois Duncan is the author of 30 books including Chapters: My Growth As A Writer, an autobiographical how-to for young writers.

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