

Nancy Warren FAQs

I recently had an email chat with an 18 year-old aspiring writer named Taylor. I thought her questions were great, so I've included some of our exchange here, and I've incorporated some of the questions I get asked in email, by person or even occasionally, and rather charmingly, by actual letter.

Q. Did you always want to be a writer?

A. No! I always wanted to be a reader. I've spent more of my life than is good for me curled up with a book. The truth is that with a cup of tea, a good book and a box of Swiss chocolates, I'm in heaven. I would have felt a lot less guilty for all that time, tea and chocolate if I'd known I was actually in training for my future career. Writers are readers first. My advice to anyone who wants to be a writer (and if they really do want to be a writer it's probably as unnecessary as most advice) is to read widely. Poetry, history, the great novels, Shakespeare, mysteries, literary fiction, genre fiction. If you are as terrified of horror as I am then you have my full permission to skip that genre. If I ever get to meet Stephen King I am going to smack him for writing *The Shining* and making it impossible for me to sleep without the light on for about a year. I am not kidding. However, I would also like to hug him for his excellent book, *On Writing*. So, you know, he's probably safe.

Q. How hard is it to get a book published whenever I do get my book done?

A. Pretty difficult. Most of us write quite a few books before we sell one. But it's a great job. Craft books I recommend are: *Techniques of the Selling Writer* by Dwight Swain, *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler and Stephen King's *On Writing*. Join a writing group if you can. Write every day.

Q. How do we know if what we have written is what the publishers are looking for and are interested in?

A. This is a difficult question because it has two answers. On the one hand, publishers want fresh stories. If J.K. Rowling had written to the market, she never would have written *Harry Potter*. Instead, she wrote the story she was dying to tell and I'm pretty sure she's not sorry she did. However, most writers aren't J. K. Rowling. They need to fit into the market place. A trip to the bookstore will usually tell you what's hot and selling well, simply by the number of titles and kinds of books that are getting the big displays. Your job is to tell your own unique story, but to slant it in a way that an editor could see where it could fit on the bookstore shelf. If you are lucky enough to be eighteen and already know you want to be a writer, then write about what it's like to be eighteen in the world today. We need more young writers telling their stories.

Q. Who comes up with the book covers and the summaries on the backs of the books?

A. Usually an art director designs the cover in consultation with the editor and the sales and marketing teams. Back cover copy is sometimes written by my editor, sometimes a copy editor, and sometimes someone in marketing.

Q. How long does it take you to write a book?

A. It depends on the book. I know, that's a terrible answer, but it's the truth. Some books have taken me two months. Some four. Some six or seven months. There are so many factors, it seems. A book that requires a lot of research will take longer, a more complex plot takes longer, and sometimes I just don't 'get' the characters right away so I have to find my way into the story. Then there are books that are truly a gift. I start writing and the story's there and it goes very quickly. However, I seem to consistently publish three to four novels a year. One year I had nine original releases. I think I must have been insane and I doubt I'll ever have that many again!

Q. What's your writing schedule?

A. Schedule is one of those words like oncologist that gives me a queasy feeling. I write every day. I have deadlines and I don't miss them. Other than that, I sort of fit things in where I can. I wish quite desperately that I was an organized, disciplined person, but at some point you have to make peace with who you are and work with your strengths and weaknesses. One of my strengths is that I do get obsessed with a book and write in insane chunks. Sadly, I don't get obsessed from 5 to 9 a.m. every day, and then have the rest of the day free.

Q. I read your sex scenes and you seem really hot. Would you like to go out sometime?

A. No.

Q. Where do you get your ideas?

A. Ideas are everywhere. In a newspaper or magazine article you read, something that happened to you or a friend, a societal trend that intrigues you, a snatch of conversation that starts you thinking, What if? The tough part is picking a story idea that you think has the legs to carry a whole book, and that you won't be sick of right about the time you hit the half-way point in the book. (Hint: if you're like me, you will always be sick of your characters, plot and self exactly at the half-way point in the novel.)

Q. What training do you have?

A. I have a degree in English lit, which is pretty good training precisely because you are forced to read widely, and also critically. My first job was as a newspaper reporter and then an editor. That's where I had to unlearn all that stuff I'd been taught about writing essays, where you build up to your big conclusions. In the newspaper business, you learn fast that your big conclusions go right at the top of the copy, because stories are cut from the bottom and readers often skim the first paragraph or two before moving on. When you write a novel you have to capture the reader's attention in a similar way. Living is also excellent training for a writer, as is traveling, going outside your own comfort zone, talking to people, watching the world, trying new things.