

*Laura Backes interviews YA author Barbara Shoup.*  
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**LAURA:** Hi, this is Laura Backes, publisher of *Children's Book Insider Newsletter*. And today, I'm talking with Barbara Shoup. Barbara is an author of books for both adults and young adults. Her young adult books include *Everything You Want* and *Wish You Were Here*, which were both just published by Flux toward the end of 2008, and *Vermeer's Daughter* and *Stranded in Harmony*. And *Vermeer's Daughter, Stranded in Harmony* and *Wish You Were Here*, which is actually a re-issue, that book was originally published in 1994, all three of those books have found their ways onto many best book lists and recommended lists for young adult readers. So, Barbara's a very popular author with that age group.

So, thank you Barbara for being here with me today.

**BARBARA:** It's my pleasure.

**LAURA:** Great! I wanted to ask you since you've written for both adults and young adults, what's the difference? Do you approach a story differently when you're writing for teens, than you would for an adult reader?

**BARBARA:** I really don't. In fact, I got in to the young adult field totally by mistake because I was writing -- I just was writing a book. And the book happened to have a teenager. I haven't done that before. And when I finished it, my agent suggested that market, I was a little aghast because I thought, "Me? Writing for young adult?" I thought I was more serious than that. But as it turned out, it's a quite serious market and I love being a part of that world. It's a completely different world from the adult market.

And what I feel is that a good book is a good book. A lot of adults love to read young adult novels for a variety of kinds of reasons. And the one thing that I do always say to people about writing for young adult is actually something that I heard Maurice Sendak say years ago when he was asked for advice about writing for children, he said, "I don't write *for* children. I write as a child." And I loved that. And I thought that it made a lot of sense because when you're writing that young people love, you really need to be writing them from where they are. And I think part of being a writer is that there might be some time in your life that you never can quite let go off because you never quite understood it. And I think that for me, my adolescent was *that*. I'm still trying to figure it out. I taught high school for years. And that's partly why. It's never too late to be popular in high school. And I feel like, "If I'm writing about it, I'm eventually going to understand who's popular and why and how it all works", and I've just been fascinated by that age. And I love that age.

**LAURA:** Well, and that leads right into my next question. I was going to mention that when I read manuscripts -- I critique a lot of manuscripts for writers -- and I can always tell the difference -- and it doesn't matter what age group they're writing for -- but there are

certain writers who really are -- it's almost like they're conversing with the reader and there are other writers who are speaking down to the reader. And you don't really feel like they're immersed in their audience. It's almost like they're set apart. And they see the audience as an entity that needs to be *taught* something.

**BARBARA:** Yeah, of an agenda as a writer is really what we're talking about here. And I think that it's a problem with all people or not all people, but it's all kinds of fiction. But it's a particular problem that you notice with people who want to write for children and young adults because they often feel that they have some kind of wisdom to impart and that *that* is the agenda for their fiction. But I don't think that fiction, *good* fiction can have an agenda because I think good fiction is fueled by some question that the writer has about life. And that writing fiction is a way of looking at that question through the lens of a character's life in a fictional situation. And so, when you think you already know the answer, when you think you already know exactly what it is you're writing about, the writing just doesn't turn out to be very good.

And you're right, it's not a conversation, it's a lecture or it's preaching. And I think we all know how kids feel about that. I used to say to my students, "Your job is to be crazy and to do really stupid things. And my job is to keep you from doing that. And so, we can have a conversation about that. I'm not going to preach to you about it. We're just going to talk about it." And I think that good fiction does that for young people.

I'm also -- I love the way that good fiction allows young people, or all people for that matter, to talk about their own lives, but they don't really know it. And kids are having all these experiences that they don't really know how to process. And most kids don't talk about the most personal kinds of things to their parents. They just *don't*. And so, they're getting information from whatever kind of sources, usually other kids. And when there's a book where some of the issues that they're dealing with are there for them to talk about in the context of characters, you find out pretty quick what they think and what they feel and what they know and what they don't know. And the conversations that you can have with students about books are so good for them because it makes them see things in different ways and to process in their own life. I've had so many wonderful conversations. I do a lot of author visits where kids will say, "That happened to me." And this book helped me understand my own parent's divorce or how my boyfriend felt when I told him that I was pregnant or whatever. They're very forthcoming in that kind of discussion. And I don't know. I find that to be really an amazing thing.

So, an agenda just doesn't work. You have to be as a writer. I don't want to say as *clueless* as your reader, because of course, you're not. But there does have to be this sense of discovery that is happening between the lines. I think it was Flannery O'Connor who said, "No surprise for the writer and no surprise for the reader." And the things that happen in the process are the things that give a book its energy and make you really want to turn the pages.

**LAURA:** Yeah, I think that really sums it up really well. Thank you for explaining that to us. As a young adult writer and also having worked with high school students for so long, do you feel that there is any subject that you cannot write about in the young adult book genre?

**BARBARA:** No. And I don't think the market thinks there's anything we can't write about either,

which I find very interesting because when *Wish You Were Here* came out in 1994, one funny thing that happened was, it has *now* -- I probably can't say it's even on the podcast -- but the *f*-word, and it had that in the draft that I sold. And Hyperion asked me to consider taking that out because -- and this is 1994, just the beginning of this whole new idea about young adult literature. And I didn't really want to do it, but I was pretty desperate. They didn't say I had to, but they wanted me to. And I wanted the book to sell. So, I did that. And I've always regretted it.

And then later, when Flux was going to put it out and Andrew Karre was my wonderful editor there, I told him that and he said, "Put it back in! Put them back in!" And so, I did. That was quite entertaining. But no, there hasn't been anything.

What I think is gratuitous sex, gratuitous violence, gratuitous anything, just for the sake of putting it in there, it doesn't make a good book. It's not even to me a moral issue. It just doesn't make a good book. And so, what I always say is, "People talk how they talk. They do what they do. And your job as a writer is to put that down. You follow them around and put down what they do, but you don't add things just because you think that it'll make the book solid or more interesting or something." So, I don't think there's any subject right now that's off-limits. And I don't think there should be. I think kids learn a lot from reading just about anything. And they process it in the way that they're ready to process it.

**LAURA:** Great! Now, as director of Programs for the Writer's Center of Indiana, you must deal with a lot of aspiring authors. And...

**BARBARA:** I do!

**LAURA:** ...I wondered if there are common hurdles that new writers all need to overcome when they're learning how to write fiction. Do you see things that in general people should be working on that maybe they're *not* working on when they're developing their craft?

**BARBARA:** Well, yeah! It's -- we always go back to that '*show, don't tell*' thing, don't we? That's really what this is all about. And it seems so simple. But it's so difficult. As recently as about a month ago, I know I sent a novel to -- that I thought was finished to my editor and she said, "You know, there's a lot of *telling* here." And I thought, "Dang! Who knew?" I thought I had that knocked, but it's *very* hard. And I think also the manuscripts that I see often don't have a lot of scene quality. I think that what makes us -- what really makes us want to read a book if we're honest is that it's like looking through a keyhole at stuff we're not really -- it's none of our business, that we are *privy* to the inner lives and the secret lives of people who are very real to us. And when that is most real is when it isn't seen. And so, the biggest problem that I see is the lack of the unseen, that writers want to tell us too much and not necessarily let us come to our conclusions by giving us a scene.

I often will have -- I have an exercise that I use that I think anyone can do. I use the movie *Witness* -- but there are many movies you could use it with -- but just to watch that movie for the first maybe about twenty minutes until the big event occurs, the murder occurs, and to write down all the things that you know from what you've seen here with no information given to you at all. And it's a real eye-opener to do that

because you realize, the grass waving a certain way sets a tone and the black clothing that the people have. And you don't really know what time in history it is until you see a red truck go by. And then, you suddenly placed it. And it's all detail that gives you this information and the way the camera works, the way the camera moves to show you what's important. So, it's a wonderful exercise. And it's absolutely the most important thing in the world to be able to write a good scene.

And then, the other thing that I noticed a lot is, what a friend of mine calls the *information dump* where you feel that you have to give the reader *all* these information up front, so that they'll know what's going on. And sometimes, people would do that for a whole chapters or two chapters when if you just jumped right in with the scene and let people figure it out for themselves, it's much more interesting.

The joy of reading is really -- it's a puzzle. And as you read, you're figuring all these things out based on what you're seeing in your mind's eye, what characters are saying, what they're not saying and you have to trust your reader and give them the opportunity to have that pleasure. And if you tell them everything, that pleasure is gone. And why would we want to read? You're just telling us what to think.

**LAURA:** That is so true. And I think that's true from the youngest picture books all the way to adult fiction. And I think that you could -- that '*show, don't tell*' and let the reader experience the story and form their own opinion is vital even for three year olds hearing a story being read out to them.

**BARBARA:** It's absolutely -- it absolutely is! And you know, the other thing that I noticed with adult writers particularly -- we get a lot of adult writers as you do for the most part -- and they're often really impatient. They are very geared toward publication, which of course, we all are. We all want to be published. But they're anxious to get their work out there. And one thing I've learned is an editor only gets the first look once. And so, you better be sure that when you send it out, that first look is absolutely the best you can give because once -- once somebody's looked at it once, it's really hard for them, even if they're interested and say maybe try these changes or whatever, it's very difficult for them to see it new. They really can't see it new a second time. So, patience is hard. It's hard for all of us. But the important thing is to write well and to learn to love the process. I also notice that a lot, that people want to have written than write. Writing is hard and messy and difficult. But if you don't love the process, you're really going to be living a lot of the time in a state of disappointed because it's a very tough thing to sell books these days.

**LAURA:** Absolutely! Absolutely! Now, in the current state of publishing every time I log on, I see another article about publishers laying off editors and imprints closing, et cetera. It's a really belt-tightening time right now. What do you think is sort of the long view that writers should have in the current industry? How should we take all of these changes?

**BARBARA:** It -- boy! I wish I had an answer for that. All I can say is the way I feel myself about it that to be honest, I've never been able to make a living as a writer even though I've published a fair number of novels and some of them have, you know, *been* there, well-reviewed and have gotten several kinds of awards, but I can't make a living as a writer, or I haven't been able to *yet*. So, I just kind of take that off the table for me. I'm very,

very fortunate to have a husband who is my patron. And I can do that. And I teach. And I do other kinds of things. I guess, I feel like you can't count on it to make a living. So, you had better have something else if you need to make a living. You need to continue to do that. And you're going to have to find the writing time where you can find it. If it means turning off the television, you turn it off.

But I also go back to what I said a minute ago, which is if you don't love the process, this is going to be an even worst time because you're right. There are cutbacks. There are all kinds of things in every aspect of our world right now that are so trouble. And for me, the process of writing and finding *that* story and when you get all excited when it starts to *cook* and then, you're -- the agony and the ecstasy, but that process is what I love so much. It never gets old to me. I would say sometimes to people at my age, I'm sixty-one, that a lot of my friends are bored with their jobs if they haven't already retired. They -- no matter how hard they are, how challenging, they've seen it all. But you know, you could always fall flat on your butt writing a book. And there's something wonderful about that. It's always hard. And it's always interesting. And that's very sustaining to me. So, I love the process. And no matter what happens in the market, I just keep doing it anyway. And maybe, with luck, I'll be one of those people who years from now, they'll be taking things out of a trunk. And my kids and grandkids will be rich or something. But I *do* love the process.

**LAURA:** Well, it's interesting. All of what you just said, I think you could also say -- could've said six months ago before the economy went south completely, loving the process and not depending on your writing to be your entire income. I think those things have always been very true for writers. And in a lot of ways, when I talk to people like you and we're talking about the current state of publishing, it becomes very clear to me that for the writer, it's important to just keep doing what you've been doing because I think it's going to cycle back around. It has to. And...

**BARBARA:** It will cycle back around. And...

**LAURA:** ...the publishers are always going to need us.

**BARBARA:** ...and -- well, that's right. They're always going to need good books. And in some ways, this sounds wacky, but I've never been -- like I said, I've never had a book that has really made it. And so, I've had a lot of the time to learn how to write. And that is not the worst thing because I think sometimes, people will have success when they first start out and they start cranking out book, but they never really -- I don't know! They never learn to love the process and they never become as good at it as they might be if they could take a deep breath. Put something away for a while and then, get it back out again and see, "Okay, this could still be better."

So, I -- I'm a bad person to give advice on the market because honestly, I don't think about it. I feel like writing is something so apart from that. Those two worlds are so different. And that's possibly why I haven't been particularly successful. I am -- it's completely incomprehensible to me. I love to teach. I love to write. I love to talk about writing, but I don't know how to market. And so, I tend *not* to do those kinds of things, probably unwisely.

I will also say that in terms of bad times or any time -- because times are always bad for writers, in a way -- but support of other writers is very important. And I think for me, the people in my life who are my good writer friends are really important. They're the only people who understand what it's like to write. And so, if you're having a bad time, they're the ones who you can talk to: family, friends, other kinds of friends. They don't get it. How could they? It's just such an unusual, strange thing to do. You really can't explain it to anybody else.

And so, I think one of the things you guys seem to be doing is providing a place where writers can connect with other writers and have that kind of -- some kind of support where in that place, whether it's real or virtual, they're all writers. And out there, people in that place know what that means. I think that's really important.

**LAURA:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

**BARBARA:** Any time.

**LAURA:** I agree. I agree. Well, thank you very much for speaking with me today. And we look forward to seeing more books from you. Don't take too long to get us another one.

**BARBARA:** I'm working hard. I'm working really hard.

**LAURA:** Oh, good!

**BARBARA:** In fact, I got one kind of going gang busters right now, which is fun!

**LAURA:** Oh, good!

**BARBARA:** But anyway, thank you so much, Laura. I really enjoyed it. And I so much appreciate you thinking about me.