

5-MINUTE MEMOIR

Tales From the Writing Life

Out of the Mouths of Babes

BY KATHLEEN M. JACOBS

As my nieces and nephews journeyed from picture books to storybooks to chapter books, it seemed as if what truly sealed their love of reading were middle-grade mainstays such as *Charlotte's Web*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Because of Winn-Dixie*, *The House on Mango Street* and particularly (my favorite) *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As their thirst for more great stories grew, a seed was planted and sprouted: I should write a book to encourage young readers to turn their love of reading into a lifelong adventure.

After completing my first novel, I called my 14-year-old niece to see if she would be interested in reviewing the work and giving me her opinion. She is a discerning reader with a candid nature and regard for nothing but the “absolute truth on absolutely everything.”

She eagerly agreed to read the manuscript, pointing out first that she was very busy with her friends and schoolwork, but that she would try to work me in, •hoping to get back to me within a few weeks.

We agreed upon a reader's fee of \$10 an hour, and I mailed the manuscript to her, along with a list of myriad questions to answer after she read the story. When she telephoned a few weeks later to discuss the work, I was thrilled that she gave it a thumbs up, but she had a few suggestions.

“In Chapter 5, you need to give a clearer description of the train station. • In Chapter 8, you don't need to explain what's going on in the bar in so much detail. Remember, readers want to figure out certain things for themselves. And in Chapter 11, you need to provide more information, because I'm not sure what's going on. I do love the dialogue that goes on in the book between the characters, and I want to know if you're going to write a series, because I fell in love with all these people, even the dad, who I shouldn't have fallen in love with. And, oh, by the way, you misspelled *voracious* on Page 68.”

The seriousness with which she critiqued the work garnered my respect and can only be matched by her asking, “Since I know you, Aunt Kathy, and I know that a lot of this story is about your childhood, I think it would be a good idea to let a few of my friends who don't know you read the book and give you their opinion.”



“What a great idea, Natalie,” I said, as I shook my head incredulously—why didn't I think of that? So the manuscript was passed from friend to friend, with myriad colored pencils • marking places of magic and places of confusion. Natalie punched holes in the overly loved pages, put the manu-



script in a pink leather three-ring binder and mailed it back to me.

I had attended writing conferences across the country for years to gain feedback from teachers and publishers. But it wasn't until I sought out the appropriate readership for my manuscript that I began to understand how important it is for writers to go straight to the source. Experts are experts for a very good reason, and teenagers know what they like. Natalie and her cadre of friends distanced themselves from any feelings they may have felt for me, instead going for the jugular, knowing full well that was what they were hired to do. It was that simple for them and that complicated for me.

Shortly after incorporating their suggestions, I sent a query to an agent, who asked to see the entire manuscript. Of course, my first phone call was to Natalie.

Kathleen M. Jacobs' short fiction, poetry and personal essays have appeared in numerous regional publications. She is currently seeking literary representation for her first middle-grade novel.