

FAQ'S For Students

by Virginia Frances Schwartz

When did you first become a writer?

I have always been a writer and always loved a good story. My family were great storytellers. We had no television until I was 12, so I read and listened to family stories. That's how I came up with the idea for "MESSENGER", just by listening close when I was young. Writing chose me at an early age – around first grade.

What was the first book you wrote?

"IF I JUST HAD TWO WINGS" was my first book, but it was published second. I kept putting it aside to work on other projects. It took 5 years to write, including research in special libraries. Writers "cut their teeth" on one book, meaning that they learn to write by writing, going through the process. WINGS taught me not just to write but how to write a novel.

Mostly, I remember writing it during winter, with snow falling, picturing Phoebe and her friends on a long journey. I closed myself up in a small room that I had just begun to call my "writing room" and committed myself to write for an hour. That hour stretched out to 5 hours. When I write, I lose track of time. Where was I in those hours? Right on the underground with the slaves. It was exhilarating to capture even a moment of it with just my mind and a pencil.

How do you write? What do you need?

A writer needs space, quiet, and snacks nearby. Sharp Number 2 pencils. Notebooks: ones for fiction; ones for journals; another for ideas. I have many notebooks of all sizes and colors, in every room of the house, in my purse, even by my bedside table to capture thoughts that appear as I drift off. Those ideas are the ones I re-read each morning when I sit down to work.

I make dates with myself to write. Otherwise I won't do it. I'll do laundry instead. Saturdays, I go to my writing room after breakfast and stay until late afternoon. I call that "riding the wave". Great things happen when you sit so long with your pencil and a strong intention to write. When I am done, I feel as if I have visited another planet. I step back into this world and feel light and fresh and free.

During the week, I keep writing dates too – at least three sessions.

What happened to Rachel in "If I Just Had Two Wings"?

At the end of the book, Rachel was on the trail "somewhere with Samuel". I plan to write a sequel to Wings soon so you will find out.

I write to discover answers and let the characters tell me. I don't tell them what to do! It wouldn't be "real" that way. By the way, the idea of sending Rachel on the underground before Phoebe was not my idea. It was my editor's! I loved the idea and it worked in the story.

Where do you get ideas for characters? How do you name them?

I model characters after family, friends or people I have known over the years. I borrow the face of one, the qualities of someone else and combine them together into composites. This makes them real for me. I must think about them often until they become like old friends. Then I hear their voices clearly. I love using multiple voices as in "4 KIDS" & "INITIATION". Who's telling the truth? Who do you know best?

As a book and its plot grow, so do the characters. My best friend growing up was "Lynnie". She became "Liney" in "Two Wings". I used actual slave names to give the book flavor.

After I read about the African ancestors of slaves and their dreams, I immediately saw my main character Phoebe as the "dreamer" who remembers the past, who brings the power back to the slaves. And Abram as the caretaker ("Send One Angel Down"). I believe that in families, many things are passed down. From my grandmother, I inherited a love of telling stories and planting. There are many qualities inside us that our ancestors, whom we have never met, gave to us. This is a theme in both "MESSENGER" & "INITIATION".

Can you share any writing tips?

Here's one I use to avoid writer's block.

I "see" the next scene in my mind like a video. I watch what the characters do as I lie down in the dark and close my eyes. When the scene becomes vivid, and I begin to hear the characters speak, I jump up and write it down. I can hardly keep up with them!

Why do you write about slavery?

I wrote "IF I JUST HAD TWO WINGS" and "SEND ONE ANGEL DOWN" because I wanted young readers to know about the injustices of slavery. It happened so long ago that anyone who is young now cannot imagine it at all. Yet the politics of slavery shaped the world and the country I live in. I wanted to open minds and hearts. When I read aloud to my students many years ago the true stories from J. Lester's "To Be A Slave", I cried and so did my students. That experience, teaching about slavery, opened my heart to write about it.

What are you writing now?

Here's 3 answers for you:

1.) You won't believe it! I'm writing about all the crazy pets (squirrel, rooster, pigeon) we had while I was growing up in Canada on a farm. It's funny and kind of crazy, written in first person, and narrated by my cat! Working title: "NUTZ!"

2.) I am working on a new book for Scholastic Canada about what happened to the slaves once they fled to Canada and began new lives. As new immigrants, exhausted, penniless, separated from family, many had a rough transition and I want to tell their story. This book is (tentatively) called "CROSSING OVER" and will be released in 2010.

3.) I am working on a memoir about my teenage years in Canada. Right now I'm experimenting with free verse to discover the right voice. Working title: "MOMENTS OF GRACE."

What do you do for fun?

Writing is my joy and I look forward to writing as often as I can. Tracking words down is like talking to an old friend, listening to all the voices inside you. As Willie, one of my characters from "4 KIDS IN 5E & 1 CRAZY YEAR" says,

"Writing is like taking a long walk out to a place where nobody else is. Far from everywhere. Something invisible as wind pushes your pencil across the page. Before you know it, you've stepped into the country where stories come from. I think you're there when words fly from your mind to your pencil tip without even thinking."

I also love to walk, swim, travel to my country home in upstate New York, garden, sleep late, go to movies, do yoga, listen to music, read late at night, eat chocolate, giggle with friends, knit sweaters, and stretch out in the hammock and relax. I can't wait for summer vacation when I can do all the above and write loads too!