

An Interview with Joanne from the Katrillion web site by student Stacy Morgan

Joanne Rocklin's written middle grade, chapter books, beginning readers, even a picture book. How does she understand people so well to write to many books? Joanne has a PhD, and is a licensed psychologist. She also claims that her three cats write books in their spare time.

What does your book FOR YOUR EYES ONLY! mean to you?

Writing is about observing and really looking at things. You observe carefully and the world reveals thing to you that you probably never noticed before. That's why I wanted to write a story connected with writing because Lucy is trying to be a writer and figure out what that means. I'm very, very interested in the writing process and about kids and what makes them tick. I used to read a lot and when I was a teenager and I guess I'm recreating for young people. That's the voice that comes out when I write.

Do you think it's important for kids to write in a journal?

Yes. It doesn't have to be a big deal. You don't have to write down every little thing. You can keep what I call a doodle journal -- it can be a poem, a drawing, or just a couple of words with the date on it. That's why I wrote, "For Your Eyes Only" the way I did, because I wanted to show that there are many different ways to keep a journal. Sometimes, as a writer, you might keep this very messy jumbled-up journal where you put things at random. And then, as you leaf through the pages, you get ideas for stories. Writing in a journal is also a way to feel better because you learn about yourself and the world."

What inspired you to write this book?

Kids are always asking me how much of my stories are true. I say all of it and none of it because you take little bits and pieces of your real life and then, as you start to write, the characters take over and it becomes fiction. One day I was reading the newspaper and there was this item about these ducks that landed in a swimming pool in Hollywood, CA, I thought gee, what if -- 'cause that's how stories start. I kept that article for a long time before I figured out how I would use it. I also knew a girl named Lucy who had to share a room with other siblings. I also read that Langston Hughes was a wonderful teacher of young people and that kind of inspired me to write a book about a male teacher who liked poetry. You have to kind of trust that it will all come together.

What advice would you give young people who are interested in writing?

The first, most important thing to remember is that writers are readers. I haven't met any serious writers who don't read a lot or haven't always read a lot. Read, read, read because then you can see how other writers do it. Sometimes people get blocked because they think their writing won't be as good as books that they're reading. Remember that the rough draft is always lousy. Once you can keep that in mind, then you just plunge in.

Remember also that revising is the most fun thing about writing. So, you do your messy first draft knowing that it's going to get better as you work on it. Write about what you know. It's a good place to start and then take what you know and add fantasy to it and fictionalize it. It makes your work richer and your writing more confident. It's a good idea to brainstorm, too. Think about stuff from your past that was funny or made you sad. Or, think about wishes that you have or play the "what if" game -- what if you won the lottery?"

What is the process like of writing a book?

It usually starts with a character that has a problem. You start with a character like Lucy, whose parents are divorced, and she misses her father. Her best friend is not as good a friend as she hoped, and she doesn't get along with her mother. Starting with your character and your problem, each day write a little bit and your character will grow. As your character grows your story will grow. It takes about six months or longer to write a first draft. Once I write that terrible, messy draft I read it over and ask how I can make it tighter. That's really a fun thing because you have something on your desk to work with instead of a blank page. So, that will take like a month or so. Then, writers submit to their editors. It varies on how many drafts you do, but the whole process takes about a year.