

Inspire: Authors and the Creative Spark

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“Inspiration happens when you turn off your brain and open your heart,” says Louise Hawes, author of *The Language of Stars* (S. & S., 2016). To Margarita Engle, author of the 2016 Pure Belpré winner *Enchanted Air* (S. & S., 2015), “Inspiration arrives at dawn in the same way that dreams swoop down during the night, unexpected, mysterious, and laced with pathways to explore.”

“When I was a kid and I felt really happy, I used to call it my ‘inner smile,’” notes Carolyn Mackler, author of *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* (Candlewick, 2003). “That’s what inspiration feels like too—an inner smile that is bursting to come out.”

Inspiration is all these things and more. If you ask a nurse or doctor to define it, they might say that it’s “the drawing of air into the lungs,” which is the “medical definition” according to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. It also means “the state of being inspired,” “a good idea,” and “something that moves someone to act, create, or feel an emotion.” The word itself derives from Middle English. Back then, it meant “divine guidance.”

For YA author Julie Berry, who wrote *All the Truth That’s in Me* (Penguin, 2013), it’s “holy,” “mysterious,” and a “magical thing.” The 2013 Printz Award-winner Nick Lake, author of *In Darkness* (Bloomsbury, 2012), says that inspiration is recognizing “that almost chemical, electric reaction between two ideas.” Meanwhile, picture book author/illustrator Philip Stead, who wrote the 2011 Caldecott Award-winning book *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* (Macmillan, 2010), illustrated by his wife, Erin Stead, says he draws inspiration from artists and artwork he admires. Ashley Hope Pérez, author of *Out of Darkness* (Carolrhoda, 2015), a 2016 Printz Honor title, explains that for her, it’s “...an image, sometimes a voice, sometimes a scenario. In each case, though, questions are what breathe life into my ideas.”

Of course, inspiration is only one part of the writing process. If you have great ideas but lack the dedication and

drive to see them through, that book isn't going to happen. You also need to work hard to master your craft before inspiration arrives. That way you're ready when the muse knocks on your door. Then you get back to work.

Still, the power of inspiration is so significant that scientists have an interest in understanding it better. Studies have revealed important insight into inspiration's role in human psychology and the creative process. Research supports what artists and writers know from experience: Inspiration is real, and though you can't will it to appear, it can be encouraged to visit by having an open spirit and a prepared mind.

The science

Psychologists Todd M. Thrash and Andrew J. Elliot were pioneers in bringing inspiration into the laboratory. In 2003, Thrash and Elliot developed the "[Inspiration Scale](#)," a four-part, self-reported measure of the frequency that individuals experience inspiration. Data from their studies revealed relationships between inspiration and other traits. They found that inspiration was positively related to intrinsic motivation and openness to experience, and negatively related to competitiveness and extrinsic motivation.

The pair also used their research to distinguish inspiration from enthusiasm, "perspiration" (aka "hard work"), excitement, madness, and other traits, and concluded that inspiration has three consistent components: evocation, transcendence, and approach motivation.

To elaborate: First, inspiration arrives spontaneously. It can't be called or caught. Second, inspiration is "transcendent," elevating thoughts above the mundane or ordinary concerns. Third, it creates "approach motivation"—a drive to share, convey, or creatively express the inspired idea.

From evocation to action

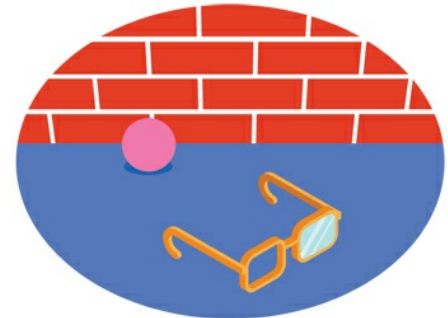
Stead believes the inspiration for his new book, *Ideas Are All Around* (Roaring Brook, 2016)—and maybe his entire career—began 12 years ago when his landlady saw a blue horse in the paint that Stead had spilled on her driveway. "If this book has a point," Stead said, "it's that all of these very strange things in our life connect to a whole."

Pérez's creation of *Out of Darkness*—a story about segregation, romance, and memory—began with curiosity and a visit to a museum commemorating the victims of the 1937 New London School explosion in Texas. The visit left her with images in her mind—a girl's shoe, a grave—which led her to questions that could only be answered by her imagination: "Whose shoe was it?" "Who found it?" "What would finding it mean for that person?"

"Most days, writing a first draft, I'm trying things out, creeping forward in the darkness," Pérez says. "But on the rare day that something feels especially right or important, I pay attention and write hard and fast. If it still feels right later, I work toward writing and revising the rest of what I have until all of the story belongs with the part that's right."

Berry and Lake have learned to recognize inspiration when it hits. "It's more likely for me that disparate pieces of an idea will sort of roll around in my head, and then someday they'll come together and they'll form this new combination of things," says Berry, with a nod to her new novel, *The Passion of Dolssa* (Viking, 2016). "That's when my pulse quickens and I take that Eureka! breath."

Lake, who is also publishing director for children's fiction at HarperCollins Children's Books UK, seemed to realize the elements that went into his latest novel as he said them out loud. *Whisper to Me* (Bloomsbury, 2015) is about a run-down boardwalk town and a girl who hears voices. It's the finished product of a strange recipe: Lake's memories, an offhanded remark from his wife, murders covered widely in the news, and other elements that Lake



"Inspiration is bouncing a rubber ball off a brick wall until it finally hits you in the face."

SHERMAN ALEXIE

says he's probably not aware of. "I think the reality is that with most books...there are probably multiple, multiple things that happen to you," Lake explains. "At some moment they spark together and kind of Frankenstein-like give life to this assemblage of different memories and concepts and thoughts."

Don't chase it

To Sherman Alexie, author of *Thunder Boy Jr.* (Little, Brown, 2016), "Inspiration is bouncing a rubber ball off a brick wall until it finally hits you in the face."

Lake discovered early in his career that inspiration ran the other way when he tried to write the story he thought he should write instead of the story he needed to write. "It's more when I try to make it happen that it doesn't work," Lake says. "I want to feel that spark of inspiration." Pérez has also learned to embrace uncertainty. "I'd say the opposite of inspiration is knowing, or thinking that you know," she says. "Inspiration is an opening toward something unknown but important, and it's only possible—at least mid-story—if I'm willing to follow new leads, entertain new directions."

Stead doesn't spend much time fretting about how the next idea is going to arrive, but he does worry about cynicism clouding his creativity. "The opposite of inspiration is cynicism," he says. "It's very easy to lose your inspiration just spending 10 minutes on the Internet."

Make room for the muse

Inspiration obeys no one but itself. Not even Homer could make the muses give him attention. That said, there are ways to create a mental space where inspiration might like to visit.

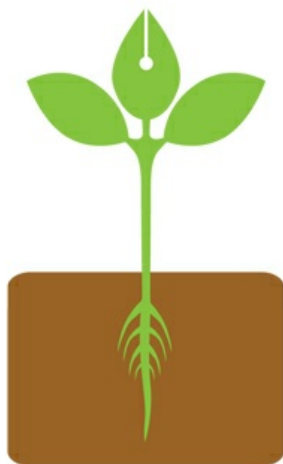
Do the work. Having a billion great ideas won't matter if you don't have the discipline to sit down and express them—to master your craft. Then, you must be willing to improve upon what you've created.

Pay attention. The ability to recognize a great idea is a skill, and the only way to hone it is to listen. "Most people have creative ideas occurring to them from time to time," Berry says. "An artist or writer...makes a habit of paying attention."

Be open. Thrash and Elliot found that openness often came before inspiration, suggesting that the former creates a path for the latter. "I wonder if it's actually more about being in a certain setting of receptiveness," Lake says.

Be a fan. Berry was inspired to write by the books she loved as a child. Stead cites picture book creators William Steig and Leo Lionni. "The themes that both Steig and Lionni addressed—themes of kindness and loneliness—those sorts of things are inspirations to me and influence my work today," he says.

Be patient. Anecdotes and scientific research reveal the same truth time and time again: Inspiration happens to you. It's not something you make happen. Even if you're showing discipline, paying attention, and embracing experience, the evocative spark won't be willed into the world.



"Inspiration is the place where the work of writing, the task of writing, sinks a little tap root down into the mysteries and wonders of existence."

—JULIE BERRY



*“Inspiration is a three-legged dog:
a striking image complete with a story.”*

TIM WYNNE-JONES

Why it matters

It’s clear why inspiration is important to writers. But there’s an argument to be made about why inspiration matters for everyone.

“Inspiration has the power to affect change not just for individuals, but also for societies,” according to a June 2014 article in *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, “The Scientific Study of Inspiration in the Creative Process,” by researchers from the College of William and Mary. The researchers listed the many ways inspiration can lead to creative breakthroughs in medicine, technology, and environmental problems, and then asked neuroscientists to dip their toes into inspiration research.

Second, as Elliot and Thrash noted, inspiration matters because of its positive effects at the individual level. Studies have found that inspiration correlates with increased goal progress and greater feelings of well-being and meaning.

Finally, inspiration matters not just because of what it can produce—but because it adds wonder to the everyday. It rewards curiosity, openness, and the very human impulse to create. “It’s a divine magical thing that’s as ubiquitous as breath,” Berry says, “and as necessary.”



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