

1. Why do you write so often in the voice of girls and young women?

I've been trying to write children's and young adult books for some time now, and I've always been interested in challenging gender stereotypes in my work. I spent a long time writing male characters who in one way or another resist some of the male roles that are presented to them. That work never seemed to appeal to anybody, perhaps because I was too close to the material. I noticed that moms and girls and female teachers were increasingly emerging in my books as the most active, likable characters. At some point, I decided to just go with that. I don't know how long I'll continue or why it seems to work, for now.



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2. The dialogue in the book really brings the characters and the sights, smells, and sounds to life. How were you able to channel Theo's voice on the page?

Many years ago, I moved to Gainesville, Fla. to cover the University of Florida for the local newspaper. The state prison near Starke isn't far from Gainesville, and it's where Florida houses its death row. I started covering events related to executions there, largely to fill in for our prison reporter when she wasn't available. This was 20 years ago, and machismo was perhaps a bigger part of the newsroom at the time. It seemed like a difficult assignment, and I wanted to take it precisely because of that. My editors were careful to offer time off afterward and all that, but generally I didn't feel traumatized by this in the way they expected. For me, it's more of a time-release thing.

More than a decade later, I was living in Montgomery, Ala., covering the state legislature. Going back to the execution chamber was the last thing on my mind. I had a habit of sitting in on legislative committee meetings, even when I wasn't writing about them, just to find out what was going on. I was in an early-morning

TIM LOCKETTE is a reporter, novelist and teacher of journalists. He has written for *Teaching Tolerance*, *The Anniston* (Alabama) *Star* and *The Gainesville* (Florida) *Sun*, among other publications, and has done extensive reporting on Alabama's death penalty. He is the author of the middle-grade novel *Atty at Law*. He lives in Alabama with his family

meeting one day when officials from the state prison system came forward with a bill that would keep the state from releasing the names of companies that supply drugs to the state for executions by lethal injection. Those prison officials said there was nothing in current state law that prevented them from releasing that information if someone requested it.

Of course, I requested the information. And they refused to give it to me, even though no bill had been passed. That led to a couple of years of digging through the public records that were available, to try and figure out why there was such a concern about secrecy.

3. What was the big secret?

I'm still not sure who the drug supplier is. But I know that for ethical reasons, drug companies tend to frown on the use of their drugs to kill people. A lot of our drugs come from companies in Europe, where there's much more opposition to the death penalty. I did find a few times when state officials would drop the names of drug companies in court documents, though it wasn't always clear whether the companies that were named were the source of the state's drugs. Typically when companies find out they're linked in some way to executions, they'll respond by releasing a statement or policy that this isn't an approved use of their product.

4. What are you trying to say, in *Tell It True*, about the death penalty?

For me, the biggest take-home is that capital punishment isn't what many people think it is. The most vociferous supporters of the death penalty seem to see it as an eye-for-an-eye punishment, something that has a satisfying sort of symmetry. In reality it takes a long time to execute someone, largely because it's important to review the case and make sure you're not killing an innocent person. The process itself is strange and medicalized and emotionally traumatic for just about everyone involved.

I think it's worthwhile to look at the death penalty, as it is, and ask ourselves if this is worth doing. A number of American states and most of our peer countries don't execute people. The alternative to death isn't to let people go, it's to put them in prison for life. What do we get out of the death penalty, and is it worth the effort we put into it?

5. Is Lisa based on a particular person?

If anybody in the book is based on an actual person, it's Blanderson. I didn't intend to base her on one of my own teachers, but when I finished the manuscript and began editing, I saw how much of her advice mirrored things that were said to me by

Jerry Chandler, an instructor in the communications department at my alma mater, Jacksonville State University.

I guess that means that to a certain extent I'm Lisa, particularly where Lisa's shown in conflict with Blanderson. But the real story is that Lisa is an amalgam of a number of young reporters I've worked with—the best of whom have a bit of wildness in them that has to be channeled toward a good use. She's entitled and cocky sometimes, but she's smart and sensitive enough to learn when people tell her something she didn't know, something she never considered.

6. What advice do you have for young writers?

First, you have to actually write. You can't just sit around dreaming about the novel you're going to write one day. Sit down and write, every day, even if you don't feel inspired.

That's the only thing you must do. Personally, I find that it's good to have a routine, writing at the same time of day in the same place. And here's something that works for me and might work for you: when you finish a scene or a section, leave yourself a note about what you expect to happen in the next scene, or leave yourself a section of dialogue you expect to happen in that scene. Getting started every day is hard, so if you leave yourself a note you'll have an idea to work with or to push back on.