
THE ENLIVENED WORLD OF AN AUTHOR OF MIDDLE GRADE NOVELS: AN INTERVIEW WITH CRYSTAL ALLEN

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Abstract

Crystal Allen, author of six novels for middle grades readers, offers an account of the characters in her books and how readers (children and adults alike) have responded to them. She shares the how and why behind her characters' personalities and possibilities on the landscape of middle grades as she recounts favorite episodes from her novels. Additionally, she explains the OwnVoices movement and chronicles her involvement in organizations that support authors of Color.

Key Words

Crystal Allen, middle grades literature, tween literature, OwnVoices, The Brown Bookshelf

Introduction

Houston-based author Crystal Allen writes books that feature middle grades characters experiencing their best lives in a unique span of time full of turmoil, grace, misadventures, and friendship. Crystal's characters emerge from her heart and mind just as they are—from 13-year-old Lamar whose hero is a famous bowler, to 13-year-old-Almond-Joy-loving Laura who plays baseball and learns lessons from her lineage. Next comes a boot-scootin' fourth-grader named Mya Tibbs who wears pink cowboy boots and loves rodeos. And after that, two brothers—Isaiah and Seth—who face a trying and unexpected tragedy.

Since her first book *How Lamar's Bad Prank Won a Bubba-Sized Trophy* was published in 2011, Crystal started and continues a pilgrimage to middle grades classrooms in her



home state and beyond, guiding tween writers in crafting their own stories. Her visits culminate in pizza party celebrations where she provides mentoring and feedback on students' stories. She even publishes some of the short stories from every visited school on her website and calls it "Strikewriters" (there is a play on words related to bowling that those of you who have read her books will understand). In 2013, *The Laura Line* landed in middle grades classrooms and libraries,



and Crystal gained even more fans. Her next character, 9-year-old Mya Tibbs came to life in 2016, and a series was born (*The Magnificent Mya Tibbs: Spirit Week Showdown*, *The Wall of Fame Game* [2017], and *Mya in the Middle* [2018]), receiving accolades from the *Kirkus Review* and *Publisher's Weekly*. Notably, in 2018, she was awarded the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) prestigious Sid Fleischman Humor Award which recognized her excellence in the genre of humor writing. Most recently, the Texas Institute of Letters named Crystal to the ranks of its distinguished honor society, celebrating her literature and recognizing her works as part of the distinctive literary achievement of Texas authors. Her next book *Between Two Brothers* will come out in 2023.

In an interview about her books and the orbit of her writing life, she spoke candidly about reactions from both children and adults to her characters. She also shared how her work in writing and publishing has broadened to being part of a network that is carving paths and plans for younger authors of Color to get their books published and into the hands of young readers. With affirming themes around family and friends, and with constructive episodes around navigating bullying and conflict, Crystal's books beckon to all "twens"—readers, soon-to-be-inspired readers, and readers who need or want to laugh and find a friendly character or two. Crystal opened up about all of this in the heartening interview that follows.

The Interview

Dixie Keyes: Why do you write for middle grades readers?

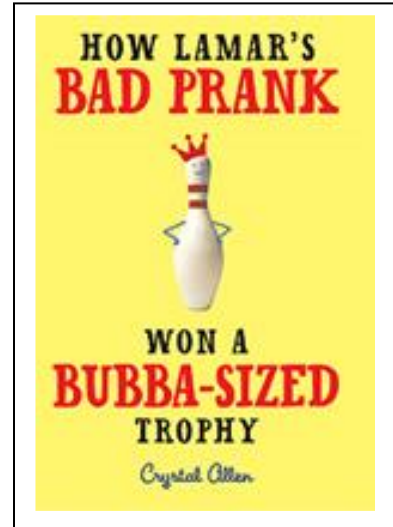
Crystal Allen: Writing for middle graders is essential because to me that is the age where they are really trying to find their way. They are too old for some things but old enough for others. They still have all the emotional components from the elementary school levels of just wanting to cry it out, to the older version of "I want to be on my own." It's a very difficult age. Writing for them is a way for me to help them understand themselves and to let them know that it's okay to be who they are.

I write a lot about the uncommon child because most of the kids out there *are*. They really fight to be accepted in places (where they really don't have any business trying to be) because their uniqueness is what's really going to make them outstanding. But they don't actually see that because of peer pressures. When I write, I try to help clear that and to show characters that aren't really having a problem with who they are. They are choosing to be themselves as they know it which helps narrow down some of the stress that they have. They have enough; they have the same amount of stress that we have. COVID has affected them too. They have had to stay home and deal with that. You know, I just chose this group because it's not that they're the most inquisitive, but they are the ones that are at the fork. People talk about seniors and juniors in high school, but it's really these kids who are making major decisions in their lives—the roads that they're going to choose. And we're not talking career-wise, we're talking

morally as contributing citizens. We're talking, you know, whether or not they're going to just be a good person. These are huge attributes for them to have to work on at that age, and so I try to write to help them.

Keys: How have your books impacted middle grades children and the adults who work with them? What kinds of comments and responses do you get once they've read the characters in your novels?

Allen: I have gotten different responses for *Lamar* than I did for *The Laura Line*. I got more responses from the actual students on *Lamar*. I got more responses from the teachers and administrative staff on *The Laura Line*. This is what's crazy—for the same reasons. The students told me that, "You know, I know a guy like him (Lamar)" (not really trying to say that it was them), but "I could totally be friends with that guy. You know, he was kind of cool." And, "When are you gonna write another one?" I also got a lot of, "I understand why he pulled the fire alarm ... I didn't really want him to, but he did and I get why he did it because his brother was really treating him in an ugly way and he wanted him to feel what it felt like to be treated that way." So, when I heard this from the students, I wasn't really sure I had made the right move because I didn't want them to think Lamar's breaking the law was okay. So, we would talk about the consequences that Lamar had to deal with.



Now *The Laura Line* ... I have been invited to more women's groups—I didn't even know that retired teachers have like a sorority, a group that gathers from all different schools, and principals too. I got invited to this home that was made up of mostly retired teachers. This evening was all about *The Laura Line*. It was not an actual book club though, but that's just one of many things that they do.

On this particular night they had laid out every food that I had mentioned in *The Laura Line* including a bowl of Almond Joy candy bars. Someone had also made an Almond Joy cake and it was just all kinds of foods on this table from my books, which I thought was really cute. What I kept hearing from them was, "I am Laura. I was brutally bullied when I was little because of blank," and they would fill in the blank: "because I was the only African-American kid in my class... because my clothes weren't like everyone else's ... because I was this, because I was that." One woman said, "It was almost as if you had written My Story." I actually got the same responses from both the students and the teachers about being able to relate to the character—just in different ways.

Keys: So, humor. I remember when I taught middle school, my students would tell me they valued humor in two ways. They wanted their teachers to be funny, and they wanted books that were funny. And there weren't that many books that were funny because there's always got to be a big conflict or problem for it to be a novel, and often those are not funny. Can you tell me about how—because you won an award in this especially—you integrate humor into a relevant conflict for the middle-school aged characters that you create?

Allen: First, let me back it up a little bit and say humor comes from pain, and a lot of people are able to mask their pain through humor. It's not the only source, but we've all had pain of some sort in our lives. For me, I have chosen to laugh, to make myself laugh more than cry. And

doing that, I just enjoy writing humor. Now when writing a book for middle graders, it is very important that I give them an opportunity to breathe. If I've got a story that I'm writing and it is about to get to a climactic state, and I'm working the story in that direction, then readers will be turning pages because it will definitely be engaging. But they need an opportunity to breathe. And sometimes I'll do that with humor. I won't take away the seriousness of the situation or dilute the plot with it. But I believe humor helps to create a well-rounded character so that you see this character laughing. You see this character doing some crazy things, and she's so funny with something unintentional. Yet, when she hurts usually the reader hurts too because they've already made that commitment as they're reading. So, when a character shows herself as having a pulse, the reader is engaged because they can relate so much more to a well-rounded character who isn't just always serious.

Keys: I love the way you described that. It really would cut the character short if you deprived them of humor within whatever conflict or struggle they're going through in the novel.

Allen: Most definitely. It would just make them a one-dimensional kind of character. I also know that one of the things that I try to do is reach out to my readers who may not have found a book that they like and reading hasn't been something that they've enjoyed in the past. I don't like the word *reluctant*. I was labeled that—a *reluctant* reader—and I just think that we haven't put the right book in their hands. Once we do that, then we may see something take off. But I do know that humor is a great tool we use to help bring those readers—who in the past have shied away from the library—to having a possible relationship with it. I have had a librarian from a high school tell me that she bought a stack of *Lamar* books for her boys who do not like reading, and they took to it like fish to water, laughing and mimicking and acting like Lamar, repeating some of the things he would say and it really went over well. She was very happy and she wrote to me to thank me for that.

Keys: Who do you think your funniest character is? It's got to be Mya, right?

Allen: It's interesting that you ask only because I thought she was so elusive at first, and then she made me go through so many different changes just to get to know her. But I have many people tell me Lamar is my absolute funniest character, and so it just depends on who you ask. For me, I do think it's Mya only because she is just so genuine. She just walks to her own ka-klunk (*that's a reference to her pink cowboy boots*) and doesn't really care. You know everything's a boot-scootin this, or "I'll just have my hair braided and count those days down." She is *so* herself and has tuned out a dream that looks like others would try to corral her in some kind of way. She's not going to be corralled. She is going to be her own girl, and I just absolutely love that about her.



Keys: Mya is read mostly by 9 and 10-year-olds, right?

Allen: Yes, third and fourth graders.

Keys: Can you talk about maybe one or two of the favorite scenes from your books?

Allen: Yes. They all have to do with family. I love family. I believe that it's important that books display love, especially love from a family. Readers should know if they don't have anything else, they have their families.

So, my favorite episode in *Lamar* is towards the end, when Xavier, his brother, gives him a trophy and calls it an MVB instead of the MVP for most valuable player. He called his MVB (most valuable brother), and it was because Lamar had given everything he had to help his brother and Xavier knew it. That to me was one of the most touching scenes in *Lamar*.



For *The Laura Line*, I believe it was a scene that hurt me, and that was when Sage broke the little chair in the shack. It was a chair that was used by the Laura Line (*all of the ancestral "Laura's" in the family*) all throughout the ages, and Grandma had used that chair to color in when she was a little girl. So, it could not be repaired. It was broken and it was gone. That was significant to me because that was the piece I put in there to reflect the fact that I did not go and visit the real house that this story was created around. My mom had a house just like the one depicted in *The Laura Line*. I never went inside. I never went inside and I should have gone inside, but I didn't. And I always thought I'd have time. You know I think we all do that—"I'll have time. I'll just go back another day," and then I became a woman and moved to Texas and got that call that my grandmother had sold the farm to a construction company. The company came through and mowed that house down, broke it into pieces that could not be repaired and I would never be able to go

inside. So, that little piece was a reflection of me—that little scene.

Between Two Brothers is the book I'm finishing up right now, and there are lots of scenes in this book that just step on my heart and smash that sucker flat, as the country song says. The main character is trying his best to understand this catastrophic event that has changed everything, and figure out how he will ever be able to get his brother back. Will they ever be able to have a relationship again? The things he takes himself through to make sure that happens is just phenomenal for this kid. It doesn't grow him or make him make decisions that an adult would make. He makes decisions that a kid who is a brand new 13 would make, and that's not always the right decision. But he's doing what he can to save his relationship with his brother whom he so dearly loves and doesn't want to lose. So, there some very strong scenes in in that story related to that relationship.

Keys: Would you like to share more about *Between Two Brothers* since it will be new to readers who are looking forward to it next year?

Allen: *Between Two Brothers* is a story about Isaiah and Seth who are incredibly close. Seth is on his way to college. Isaiah, being in middle school, doesn't want him to go even though he knows that Seth is excited about the college scholarship he received. But a catastrophic event happens that changes the boys, and they have to figure out a way to heal the relationship, to fix it whatever it takes. It's gut-wrenching in places and there's a lot of truth in the story because it is based on a true story. I'm glad I was able to pen it.

I'm actually happy that I'm finished with *Between Two Brothers*. It was very hard to write that story. The plot does not belong to my sons, but the emotion does. The emotion I took from every member of my immediate family—my husband, my sons, and myself. Then I gave all of the emotion that I've heard from them to Isaiah, the main character. There were times when I

spiraled, and I just went to the deepest basement, you know and couldn't see. I couldn't find my way out and stopped writing for weeks. But at some point, I was able to bring myself out of that basement and climb the steps and get back up into the light and start writing again. I know there's an importance, I know that there's a need for this story, and not just for middle graders. A lot of walls had to come down from in my mind that I put up because I didn't want to revisit those times ever again. And when those walls came down, the smells actually came back in my nose and sounds and things that I wasn't expecting returned, and it caught me off-guard. I mean just in a way that I hadn't noticed before. The experience changed my personality for a while, and so I'm glad to be done. I'm sure my family is glad that I'm finished. I know my editor is very happy and my agent. It usually takes me about five or six months to write a book; this one took me five years to write, and they didn't pressure me at all.

Keys: I was wondering if you could speak to any approach that you've taken when considering diversity in your books.

Allen: First of all, there's something called "OwnVoices." OwnVoices is exactly what it says. For instance, I could not tell the story of your life because I've never been white, and I don't know everything that you have felt in your life through your experiences as a white woman. Even though I have never been a slave, I have been hated on because of my skin color. Just back in 1988 I was denied an opportunity to go to a restroom. It still happens, and that pain is very real. I have no business trying to write a story about the Holocaust if my main character is involved in it. I don't know what that feels like. I have no idea what that feels like. That's what I'm talking about with OwnVoices. Now, if you have two boys—one African-American and one white boy—both wanting to learn how to skateboard, I'm down with that. I have no problems with that because race is not an issue here. I try to write stories where race is not the main issue, but my characters are characters of Color. My main characters are because I want all students to read my stories and feel comfortable reading them. I don't want them reading a story and saying, "Oh, I had to read this for history class." I'm trying to provide enjoyable reading with my characters, and the fight is real. What I just told you, I hear it from Hispanic authors. I hear it from Asian authors. I hear it from every ethnic group that, you know, yes, diversity is so important because that's what we live in. Our world is a gumbo; it's got everything in it, so you can't really create this all-white world and think that that's how it is because it's not. But we don't need white authors saying, "You want more diversity? I'll come help you," and then start writing the book and invoking like a privilege in doing that. They don't understand. We don't need saving. We just need—*buy our books* and give them to children for gifts at Christmas, for birthdays and feel great about it. And read it yourself before you give it to them. It'll give you something to talk about.

So, that's my take on diversity. We are nowhere close to being evenly represented in the libraries. But we are making strides. We need to make more strides in the area of editors—more editors who can see our experiences and understand them as truth, instead of saying, "I'm just going to take your word for that because I don't really know. I'm not really sure if that's true or not. It's outside my scope so I'm just going to trust you on that."

Keys: Tell me about your roles in various organizations that are working to lift up authors of Color.

Allen: I'm on [*The Brown Bookshelf*](#) committee. I work with *Highlights*. I am the co-director of *Kindling Words East*, and I'm very interested in this *Texas Institute of Letters* which I was just

inducted into. I think that they have things going on. I'm a member of SCBWI. I get called on to do keynotes and teachings for them.

Keys: So, looking at the next 5 to 10 years, what is your prediction about some of the up-and-coming authors of Color?

Allen: That is a great question. I have high hopes, and the reason I do is because organizations are starting to provide a means for writers of Color to have an opportunity to learn the same way that white writers have learned in the past. They are raising money—they are giving money to these young writers that will pay for their travel, pay for their housing and their food as they come and hone their craft. Then editors' houses and literary agents will also come to that same place to see them and possibly give them a contract. Because of that, the future looks bright. There still needs to be a whole lot more done in different areas. But just knowing that this is something that is happening pleases me very much.

Conclusion

Crystal Allen gives life to her middle grades characters, and they, in turn, fortify the lives of readers through stories of relationship, of making mistakes and being okay, of humor that is so often found in pain, and of love—so much love. She offers her shoulders to upcoming authors of Color, networking to build assured spaces for diverse books that need to be on library shelves. And, as she continues to write and build new voices of characters that will come to life, she does what she loves most—she visits middle grades classrooms to recognize and enliven her readers' voices too. For more about Crystal and her books, visit her website at <https://crystalallenbooks.com/>.



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Dixie K. Keyes, Ed.D., is a Professor of Education and Reading at Arkansas State University where she guides preservice teachers in teacher preparation coursework. She also teaches writing pedagogy, adolescent literacy, and critical literacy coursework at the graduate level. She taught middle and high school English Language Arts for 13 years and served as a secondary literacy coach before becoming a faculty member at Arkansas State. She directs the Arkansas Delta Writing Project and is a past-president of the Arkansas Council of Teachers of Language Arts. She writes poetry, blogs, and facilitates yoga and writing series in her local community. She can be reached at dkeyes@astate.edu.