
PATIENCE AND PERSISTENCE: AUTHOR JANAЕ MARKS ENCOURAGES YOUNG READERS AND WRITERS AT THE 2023 LITERATURE FESTIVAL

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Abstract

On October 4, 2023, author Janae Marks served as the featured writer at the Literature Festival in Topeka, Kansas. Held annually on the campus of Washburn University, the Literature Festival brings together young readers, their teachers, and authors in an effort to celebrate and promote reading and young readers. In this interview conducted during the Literature Festival, Marks discussed a variety of topics on the subject of literature written for young readers, including the importance of storytelling in the lives of students as well as the challenges and rewards related to writing for an audience of young readers. Over the course of her time at the Literature Festival, Marks emphasized the importance of persistence and patience in the life of a writer, and she encouraged young readers to explore a wide range of genres in order to continue to grow throughout their reading lives.

Keywords: Janae Marks, *From the Desk of Zoe Washington*, persistence, storytelling, young readers, The Literature Festival

As the featured writer for the 2023 Literature Festival, writer Janae Marks spent an entire day on the campus of Washburn University with approximately 175 middle school students and 30 teachers from Topeka and the surrounding area. The author of *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* and other popular novels written for young readers, Marks opened the day's events with a presentation in which she explained her writing process, passed along advice for the aspiring young writers in attendance, and talked about two of the most crucial qualities that she believes writers must cultivate. Over the course of the entire day, students had the opportunity to listen to Marks' presentation, engage in an open Question-and-Answer forum, and even meet the author (which, naturally, involved snagging autographs and snapping selfies). While Marks was clearly the center of attention at this year's Literature Festival, as always, the overarching focus was on celebrating both the books that are written for young readers as well as those young readers themselves—readers who are keeping the love of books alive and well around the state of Kansas.

Those familiar with *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* might recall that the titular character harbors a dream of becoming a pastry chef, so it was a natural step for Marks to remind the students in attendance that writing and baking share some important qualities: Marks pointed out that

carefully crafted outlines function in many of the same ways that recipes do, providing writers with an overall framework that *guides*, but doesn't dictate, creativity. Both writing and baking involve, as anyone who practices either discipline would tell you, a fair amount of trial and error. And at the end of both processes, you hope to end up with something that everyone can savor and enjoy. This last step proved to be the case for the readers of *Zoe Washington*, as the students in attendance enthusiastically discussed their reading of Marks' novel in small groups and asked plenty of insightful questions about it when they had their chance in the Q&A sessions.

On that same theme of the link between writing and baking, Marks' comments returned time and time again to two qualities that both writers and bakers must possess: Patience and Persistence. Marks noted that she tends to write about characters who have big dreams—and when it comes to both aspirations as well as great baking, we know that they both can take time to come to fruition. Marks connected these themes when talking about her own journey as a writer, noting that even though she wrote her first complete manuscript in 2008, she didn't land her first book deal until 2018, and it wasn't until 2020 that *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* was finally published. Patience and persistence, indeed. Marks reminded the young readers in the audience that both baking and writing take time, involve false starts, and require one to build out from those failures. In a nutshell, she urged the students to “Hone your grit.”

At the end of a day in which Marks spent nearly six hours visiting with the young readers in attendance, she was kind enough to sit down for an interview in which we covered topics that ranged from the challenges and rewards of writing for young readers, to how a writer for young readers balances seriousness with accessibility, to the importance of storytelling in the lives of today's middle schoolers. That interview, lightly edited for clarity and concision, follows:

Kienholz: We know that young readers are a fascinating and challenging audience—capable and really demanding. What do you find challenging and what do you find rewarding about writing for middle schoolers?

Marks: Well, what I find rewarding, for sure, is their excitement level around books. When they become excited about reading, it's so high. Even just today [at the Literature Festival], you see kids so excited to get a book signed or to meet their favorite author. While the love for reading continues on into adulthood, I just don't think that same level of enthusiasm exists. You know, you get a little more jaded as you grow up, and I think it's just such an exciting time for them [younger readers]. There are so many changes they're going through. I think I just enjoy writing about some of those things, too, so I think that's really getting a chance to help kids feel less alone in what they're going through or make them feel like they have something they can go to when they feel like they need an escape. I think it's really rewarding because they have a lot of stressors they're dealing with, too, even at that age. I think what can be hard is I'm obviously not a child anymore, so I think just making sure that I can stay relevant and know what kids are thinking about and just keep trying to write things that are going to stand the test of time—I think it can be challenging. So, when I am thinking of ideas, I want to make sure that this is going to be something that kids are going to really relate to and that I am not just trying to put my adult perspective on them.

Kienholz: *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* invites readers to wrestle with important, complex issues like justice and persistence. Would you speak to your sense of why these are crucial topics for an audience of young readers to grapple with?

Marks: I think a lot of kids this age are grappling with it already, just in the world. I think kids this age, due to social media and the internet, are exposed to a lot more of these things and a lot more of these thoughts or may even just be experiencing some of them in their own hometown or in their own families that they're already engaging with these topics. I think what a lot of adults are worried

about is giving kids books with these heavier themes or they're feeling like they want to shield them, but a lot of the kids are already living them. One of the statistics I read when I was researching *Zoe Washington* was that one in every 27 children in the United States has a parent in prison. It's a lot more than I ever would have thought. But if that is already what kids are dealing with at a really young age, then why shouldn't they have a book that allows them to kind of try to process some of these things and maybe feel less alone in their experiences? Or if it's not their experience, then we learn about what other kids are going through. I think kids are already engaging with a lot of social justice issues these days. A lot of kids are really getting involved. You can see there are a lot of kid activists out there. To me, I feel like it's already what's going on, and so it really makes sense that a book should reflect that—you know, what kids are thinking about. And they're worried.... So when they get to read about kids trying to, you know, engage with those topics, I think it helps them feel like, *OK, this book is something that I can relate to because I care about these things, too.*

Kienholz: We know representation is important in literature written for young readers. How do you think about that in your writing as an author who's writing for an audience of middle schoolers?

Marks: I think the conversation of representation in children's books kind of started before I was even published, so I was already thinking about it before I even got a book deal. There's that organization, [We Need Diverse Books](#), that really put the conversation into a lot of people's minds about why we really need to have inclusion—and not just race, but all kinds of diversity. I was already thinking about that and it kind of made me feel like, alright, I know, as a person of Color myself, I really did want to write about characters who look like me. Especially when I looked back at the books I read as a kid, there wasn't a ton of diversity. And it was the norm, so I didn't really think about it back then at all.... But now there's an opportunity to do that and the publishers fortunately were wanting to help do that now. And so, I think that for me it was a priority from the beginning of writing the *Zoe Washington* books. Because in the past, I think my previous books, I wasn't really thinking too much about it.... I think it just became a priority for me because I was thinking about, my own self as a kid, what I wish I could have read more of. And also, you know, my own kid or other kids that I'm seeing around me, like they deserve to see themselves as the heroes. You know, they deserve to see themselves as the person going on the adventure, if it's that kind of story, and not just the sidekick. And also, I was just really excited to see that other authors were already doing it before my book even came out.

Kienholz: What's your sense of the importance of storytelling in the lives of readers today?

Marks: I think storytelling or getting to read stories, for one, could be an escape. It could be a fun escape. I think that there's so much going on in the world that's stressful that, for me, reading is just a great way to turn it all off and just get into a story that you're really into and, you know, really connect with these characters. So, I think that for kids not only is it good for them because they need to learn how to become better readers, but also just for the fun of it. Obviously, storytelling has been part of culture—being human—forever.... I think it's just a really great way for kids to be able to process their feelings. Going back to tough topics, I think it's a really great way for parents and teachers to introduce tough topics to their kids because they can really process it through this fictional story.... So, I just think this is a great way for kids to feel, to really process our world.... I think that's why we need to have stories—and not only just stories, but going back to the earlier question, a *diverse* set of stories.

Kienholz: I imagine you get asked quite often about advice for young *writers*, which you did address in the session to begin the day. But I was wondering if you might have some advice for young *readers* when it comes to building an interesting reading life.

Marks: I think that it's about trying to read what you enjoy. It's meant to be fun.... I'm alright with whatever format you want. A lot of people enjoy verse novels because they feel like a verse novel is a little less intimidating because there's a lot more white space on the page. So, I think whatever book you want to read, it doesn't matter to me what format it is. Even audio books. It's still listening and absorbing the story. But then once you get into reading, once you've figured out what your favorite thing is, stretch yourself. Try other books.... Once you find your favorite genre, switch it up sometimes. I think another part of being into books is to engage with your community of book lovers. I feel like it's such a fun thing to be able to chat with your friends about books. In school that could just be your friends in your classroom. It doesn't necessarily have to be joining a book club, but it can be.... Share your love of books with others and become friends with people through that because it's so fun to chat about your favorite books with people. I would say stretch yourself. Try different genres. Maybe even try different formats—listen to an audiobook or maybe try a graphic novel if you normally weren't into that. And then maybe find community. That will keep you motivated to want to read even more. And support your local independent bookstores and your libraries. That's really important.

After listening to Janae Marks throughout the day at the Literature Festival and after having the chance to visit during this interview, it became readily apparent that she sees potential energy in both the books young people read as well as the young people themselves. That is, books possess a *kinetic energy* that has the power to build empathy and understanding in their readers, and in turn those readers can go out to change the world. While she incorporates those big dreams and aspirations into the lives of the characters she creates, she clearly encourages her readers to build those same hopes and goals into their own lives. At one point during her presentation, Marks revealed that it was actually her readers who prompted her to write the follow-up novel to *From the Desk of Zoe Washington*—a powerful nudge from the young readers who love her books and a good reminder that honing your grit can pay real-world dividends.

Toward the end of the interview, our conversation turned to the recent spate of book challenges that have occurred across the country in unprecedented numbers, and Marks once again took a moment to remind adult readers that they, too, have agency and can make a difference, just like her young readers: “If you know that there is a book being challenged in your area, go to the meeting and stay and give your feedback about it. Use your voice. I think it's just getting to the point where all the other people who want to ban the books are using their voices and being loud in those meetings. We need more people who are against the banning to do the same.” In other words, *hone your grit* and be persistent in the face of those who are looking to limit the books available for young readers.

Throughout the entirety of the Literature Festival, Marks continually reminded her young readers to “Keep going,” returning to those twin themes of Persistence and Patience. And while her advice might have been couched as words of wisdom for aspiring writers, it also sounded like wise counsel that could find application for those in attendance who might find themselves in front of the keyboard in search of an idea, in front of a classroom full of students, in a kitchen trying to perfect a new dessert, in a discussion about banning a book, or just in life, generally. “Keep going,” Marks says. “You’ll get there.”

Author Biography

Kevin Kienholz is a professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Emporia State University. At ESU, he is the English BSE program coordinator, and he works primarily with students who are preparing for a career in the middle/high school English language arts classroom. He can be reached at kkienhol@emporia.edu.