

Art helps characters heal in YA fiction

"Each time we take a step closer to who we really are we get stronger."

Lois T. Stover is the chair of the educational studies department at St. Mary's College of Maryland. Her upcoming book *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Adult: Who is the Real Me?* (with co-author **Connie S. Zitlow**) examines the healing value of the arts in young-adult literature. **Conrad Wesselhoeft** was among the authors she interviewed for the project. Here's an excerpt of their discussion.



Q: Are you writing for a teenage self who was involved in the arts?

A: Probably at some level, yes. (When you write, you're all ages of yourself.) As for my own teenage involvement in the arts, it was limited. I did a bit of messing around and jamming on guitar but rarely performed on stage. However, excelling and performing are not the point. Just doing it, that's the point. If you keep at it you get better. A little of this leads to more of that. Music begets joy, joy begets healing. On and on.

Q: So you were more an observer and appreciator?

A: I was soaking it in, so to speak. I read a lot--slowly--because I was dyslexic. I went to a lot of movies. My high school emphasized great literature--Dickens, Shakespeare, Hemingway, Steinbeck. On the side, I was gorging on TV--"The Fugitive," "Rawhide," "Marcus Welby, MD." Over the years, your subconscious starts to build templates from all this exposure to stories, both the language and plot. That doesn't necessarily make you a writer. But it gives you a place to start.

Q: Have you had any response to *Adios, Nirvana* from young adults who say they feel validated by the portrait you paint of musicians and poets?

A: The reaction from young adults has been more to the portrait of grief. They empathize with Jonathan, who has lost his twin brother and best friend. They recognize that music and poetry are outlets for his pain, and inlets for his healing. Several readers have commented on Ruby, Jonathan's damaged yet sainted acoustic guitar. One said that her favorite character was "not human but made up of wood and wire." I liked that.

Q: As I was reading *Adios, Nirvana* I kept stopping to mark points about your language – both in your narration as well as in Jonathan's poetry. What can you share with us about your own love of language and how that got sparked?

A: The feedback I've received on the language runs the gamut from "poetic" to "peculiar," from "raw" to "dangerous." Possibly everybody is right. I write what feels and sounds true. After years of doing this, you become surer of what you want to say and what you want to leave out. Still, I find writing hard work. I rewrite obsessively—in part, because I don't have perfect pitch—and in part because I know that young-adult readers hold writers to a high standard. They can spot a fake a mile away. I like Hemingway because he opened the door for awkward voices, Kerouac because he said "Hurry up!" and Charles Bukowski because he said "Warts and all, warts and all!"

Q: We've heard that you're part of a writing group, "Stages on Pages," that consciously writes about young adults who create their sense of self through their immersion in their art. How did this group form?

A: "Stages on Pages" was started by YA novelist Stasia Kehoe (*Audition, Spotlight*) as a way of promoting YA fiction with strong artistic themes. Stasia is a fantastic writer. I was honored that she asked me to join. Other talented "Stages on Pages" colleagues include Louise Spiegler, Tara Kelly, Jessica Martinez, and Roseanne Parry.

Q: What's the value of being part of this group for you?

A: First, not all publishers have the budget to promote every book as widely as they'd like, so "Stages on Pages" is our way of promoting our own work--of getting out to bookstores, schools, and book fairs to meet readers, booksellers, and librarians. Second, writing is lonely--or at least solitary. "Stages on Pages" lets us meet other writers with similar interests.

Q: You're also a member of a critique group. What's the value of this group for you?

A: I've been part of a critique group for many years. Critiquing offers constructive review of work in progress, shared secrets of the craft, invaluable networking, emotional

support, and friendship. My group has played a crucial role at every stage of my writing journey. Through it, I met my agent (and through my agent, my editor). A wise editor once said that writing success was built upon the Three Ps—Patience, Practice, and Perseverance. I agree but would add a B and C: B for Believe in yourself, because many others won't, especially at first; and C for Critique Group.

Q: Does being in a critique group have any downsides?

A: Potentially, yes. Probably the most egregious is over-dependence on the group, resulting in disorientation of personal vision. Never lean so heavily on your group that you lose your way. A critique group should be the crew of your writing ship, not the captain.

Q: It was interesting to read about your encounter with Scott O'Dell and how that one day changed your life. How did you choose O'Dell to interview – rather than someone who writes for adults?

A: I'd read *Island of the Blue Dolphins* when I was about twelve or thirteen. I still remember getting goose bumps when I read the last page. At that age, I had no knowledge of literary craft, just an appreciation for the storyteller's magic. Twenty years later, as a journalist working at the New York Times, I read that O'Dell lived just north of the city. I got permission from the Times to write a feature profile on him. O'Dell met me at the train station. He was eighty-five years old and very robust. We climbed into his big car, and he peeled for his home on Long Pond. He drove fast. The interview was supposed to last a couple of hours, but it lasted about six.

Q: Did O'Dell give you any tips or insights about writing?

A: Plenty. He was very generous that way. (See the sidebar at right for excerpts from a piece Conrad wrote about that day: "Becoming a writer: How Scott O'Dell changed my life.")

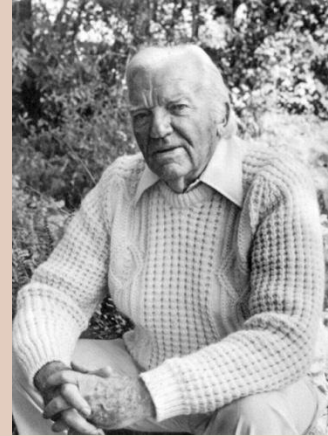
Q: Did you stay in touch with O'Dell?

A: Yes, we corresponded for a few years, and he critiqued my early efforts at YA fiction. Years later, I read that he had been working on a book in his hospital bed, just days before his death at age 91. In my opinion, that's the way to go.

Q: Any other memories or impressions of your meeting with O'Dell?

A: Just that that day is hands-down one of the most important of my life. It set me on the path of writing young adult fiction. I've read *Island of the Blue Dolphins* more than any other novel, YA or adult, including aloud to my children, as well as listening to it in audio format. For me, the story works in every way: the spare, cadent prose; the remote island setting; the themes of the individual against nature; and respect for all life. All of these elements crystallize into the most powerful and wonderful story. That book is the gold standard for me. Scott inspired me to push through my self-imposed limits, including self-doubt, and get to a better place.

Words of wisdom from Scott O'Dell



*One of the most acclaimed young-adult authors of his generation, Scott O'Dell wrote nearly two dozen books, including *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *The Black Pearl*, and *Sing Down the Moon*. In 1984, he shared these writing insights with Conrad.*

Writing is about starting. Start simply, even if it amounts to no more than 15 minutes a day. Open an empty notebook and on page one write: "I want to write a book about..." Then write: "I want the main character to be..." It's okay to write in fragments. It's okay to use weak verbs. Just write. Spill all of your ideas into that notebook. On about day five, or seventeen, or fifty-five, something will happen. A light will turn on. You will see the way.

Writing is about finishing. Scott liked to quote Anthony Trollope, the English novelist: "The most important thing a writer should have is a piece of sticking plaster with which to fasten his pants to a chair."

Writing is about reading. Soak up all the great books you can. Scott loved Willa Cather's spare, lyrical prose style, singling out her novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Writing is humble. Let your forebears guide you. Scott followed Hemingway's advice: Stop your day's work at a point where you know what is going to happen next. That way, you'll never get stuck.

Writing for young readers has a special reward. Scott told me that before he discovered young audiences, he had only a tentative commitment to the craft of writing. Now it was strong. "The only reason I write," he said, "is to say something. I've forsaken adults because they're not going to change, though they may try awfully hard. But children can and do change."

Q: It's interesting that you portray parents who just really do not understand their children in some ways. Were you consciously trying to provide such a view of parents in the face of so many other novels in which parents are either totally absent or not supportive?

A: Parents and grandparents play a huge role in a young adult's life, even when they're absent or neglectful. I'm far more interested in stories with multiple generations of characters because so many more levels of feeling and knowledge are involved. The generations need each other, lean on each other, and teach each other. To leave parents, grandparents, and teachers out of the mix would be a loss for everybody. Plus, I have a huge amount of fun creating middle age and older characters with all of their wonderful idiosyncrasies.

Q: Did you have teachers who made a positive difference in your own life, perhaps teachers who introduced you to any of the authors and books you describe as having influenced your writing?

A: The one who stands out is Robert H. Spock, my English teacher in 7th and 9th grades at Lakeside School in Seattle.



Robert H. Spock

(He was the younger brother of the famous baby doctor and best-selling author Dr. Benjamin Spock.) Mr. Spock had an incredible feel for language and literature. He would read aloud passages of *Shame*, *Julius Caesar*, *John Brown's Body*, and many more, getting us to hear the music of the English language. He also made us memorize long passages, which I resented at the time but am grateful for now. When we got

something wrong, he would quote from Marc Antony's speech in *Julius Caesar*: "You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things. O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome." He said this with a twinkle in his eye.

Q: What advice would you give teachers and other adults who can play significant roles in the development of young adults about how to interact

with and support those young people who need to paint – or even just listen to music the way all of us need to breathe?

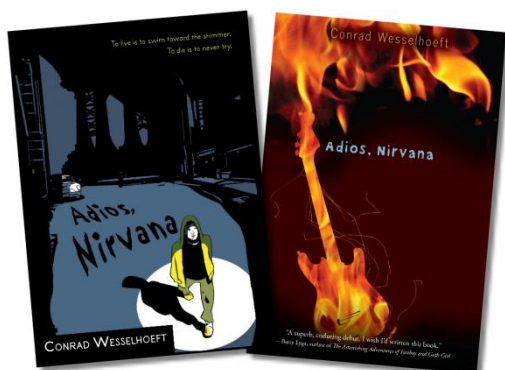
A: Not all kids need to have their talents trotted out before an audience. Sometimes the only audience they need is themselves. We pursue art to feed our souls. To force an unwilling kid on stage can distance that kid from the pleasure of his or her gift. So teachers and adults need to be respectful of a child's artistic needs. If a child wants to perform--great. Encourage that. If not, that, too, is okay. Time may change their minds, but don't shove performance at them. Let them move toward it at their own pace. To quote a prodigiously artistic friend: "It's not about perfection; it's about joy."

Q: *Adios, Nirvana* is a novel that clearly provides hope for the future; Jonathan is going to be O.K., and he's learned a lot about the importance of being open to what many different individuals, in many stages of life, have to teach him. How important do you think it is to have that note of hope in a novel for young adults?

A: Hope is extremely important. I choose themes that are important to me. Foremost among these are hope, healing, family, and friendship. These are themes I'd like my own children to embrace. Life can be hard and seem hopeless, so as a writer I choose to send out that "ripple of hope" on the chance it may be heard or felt, and so make a difference.

Q: What advice would you give to teens struggling to break away from parent or peer-group imposed identities and create a sense of self?

A: All of us are great people in the making. One doesn't have to be rich, famous, brilliant, beautiful, or an outward success to be great. One of my favorite examples from fiction is the fisherman Santiago in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago starts out poor and ends up poorer. However, in the course of the story, he tests himself to the limit. We see his strength, courage, humility, dignity, and hopeful spirit. Each time we take a step closer to who we really are we get stronger. So my thought would be, if you can't take big steps toward your goal now, take small ones. As with all goals (including writing YA fiction), time is your friend. So to teens who are struggling, I say be patient, practice, persevere, believe in yourself. Never give up.



Adios, Nirvana
Conrad Wesselhoeft

www.AdiosNirvana.com