

Suggested interview questions for JR Young

1. JR, there's never been a middle-grade fantasy book written in verse—in fact, it's rare to see full-blown stories in *any* genre written completely in verse today. What was it like to write *The Tale of Nottingswood*, which is so different from everything else that's out there, and were you worried you had taken on too great a challenge?

Yeah, I was worried. In fact, I quit not even a third of the way through because I thought “this is ridiculous” and that I was wasting my time. It wasn't until a year later, after a few wise words from a close friend and some other personal experiences, that I returned to finish what I had started...and I'm so grateful I did. It's been a magical experience and has had a profound effect—not just on me—but others who read it as well.

As far as writing something completely different, you know, I never set out to write something different. No writer, in my opinion, should write a story to “try” to be different. I simply sat down to write the story my mind and heart wanted to tell, and it just so happened the words came to me in verse. And because I had started it in verse, I couldn't very well just stop and turn to prose. There was a charm and a flow that was established by the rhythm of the meter, and I couldn't abandon it.

2. Where did the inspiration for *The Tale of Nottingswood* come from?

You know, that is a very complex question in this case. It's not like was walking through the park one evening, saw children frolicking and said, “I have a great idea for a book!” It didn't happen that way. I never said, “I'd love to write a story. Now what can I write about?” and subsequently come up with a premise and a storyline.

*What happened with *Nottingswood*, one would say, was an inversion of how most other books are “inspired.” I wrote the story before I discovered the inspiration.*

The inspiration can be found hiding in the very last two lines of the book... and I'd hate to spoil the ending.

3. What got you writing the story in the first place?

This is how it happened:

Personally, I'm a very religious person, which means I pray about everything. As I began praying more earnestly about my life's direction, one word sounded loudly in my mind, drowning out all other thoughts—“Write.” This strong impression never let up. Morning, midday, night, whenever I'd pray, this word showed up loud and clear. I would think about, then pray about what I was supposed to write about, but the only answer that came was—“Write.”

After a week of this, I finally said, "Fine!" And at 2:00 in the morning I sat down and just wrote whatever words popped in my head. It was very stream-of-consciousness. When I finished, I had completed what now comprises the prologue through what is currently the first 5 pages of the book.

4. How have your experiences shaped the way you tell stories?

I was a Navy brat. My dad wasn't home a lot during the week, but whenever my dad was home, he would pull out our bedtime stories to read to us. My sister and I would never let him finish. "Mom reads it better!" Poor Dad; he tried.

My mom had a way of reading stories that pulled us in, brought ink and paper to life, and got us to discover unforgettable worlds and characters. I have never forgotten that.

My theatre, and musical theatre training taught me not only how to perform a great story, but also the elements that make up a great story. I learned how to use dialogue... and when not to use it.

For me, storytelling is all about "impact." So when I tell any story; when I write any story, I use every tool in my toolbox to go for maximum impact: to pull in the reader, bring ink and paper to life with unforgettable worlds and characters in a way that will impact their life in a positive way.

5. Is it true you like talking to young audiences? How do you engage with them?

I tell them stories they can relate to in the most entertaining way possible. Young people love to be entertained. The key to successfully speaking to any audience is to keep bouncing them between their right and left brains. Use fun and dramatic stories to excite the right brain, then hit them with a question or a statement to drive home the point you want to make, tickling their left brain. (Questions work best because they promote self-reflection which we do too little of today.) Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, then make them laugh again.

When parents of children with Asperger Syndrome come up to thank me for inspiring their child to go on to college when they were ready to give up on life, you know you're doing something right... and anyone can do it.

6. The heroes in your novelette are a pair of twins—Brother and Sister—why not one hero or heroine as in many other fantasy adventure stories? What's the significance behind that particular choice?

I don't think it was a choice; it just sort of happened that way. I know that's not very intriguing. A part of it is reflective of my own children. I have a son and daughter who are very close in age, and another son and daughter that are very close in age. In a way, these characters are, not modeled after them, but, modeled for them.

Remember, though, this is a parable. This story is deeply symbolic and metaphoric. For example, don't we all argue with ourselves...much like how siblings argue? Something to think about.

7. How do you handle the issue of religion when discussing your book?

That's a great question. The absolute beauty of parables is that it will mean different things to different people depending on their own unique set of experiences and beliefs. It's been fun to see the different interpretations from such a cross section of people—the religious to the non-religious—and each interpretation differs from even my own. I even had an individual pull out a meaning that I hadn't even discovered yet, and it was actually exciting.

*So, to answer your question, I don't talk about religion when discussing my book unless the person I'm speaking with has a religious interpretation. I talk about the book according to the understanding and interpretation of the individual reader. That's the magic of **The Tale of Nottingswood**.*

For example, there's no religion or philosophy that owns the truth "be nice." When one can distill truth out of any theological, political, or philosophical context, then allow those truths to be discovered in their purity, they can be more easily understood, digested and applied to one's own life and circumstances.

8. Rumor has it you're a closet composer and conductor. How does this help with your writing?

Yes, I am a closet composer. I love music. Actually, I just love story-telling. I don't care the medium. I've been a singer/songwriter for many years. JR Young is actually the not-so-alter-ego of Justin Young. My singer/songwriter music can be found on YouTube under Justin Young Music, and on CDBaby. I'm not the Hawaiian musician by the same name. We get mixed up a lot. I've actually sold several albums in Hawaii thanks to the mix-up.

I haven't published any orchestral/choir compositions yet, and I do actually conduct a 30 – 40 member choir, which is a lot of fun.

*As far as music's impact on my writing, I would say that it helps me find the "melody" of my story. It's interesting you bring that up because I had someone come to me who read the book and told me *The Tale of Nottingswood* has music in it; they could hear the music of the story as they read it.*

The dynamics we find in music must also be found in our writing: the fortes, the pianos; the dissonance, the resolves; the crescendos, the decrescendos; all must be found in a good story.

It doesn't matter if you're a writer, actor, dancer, or singer; you are a storyteller first. If you're not, you will fail.

9. Your book, *The Tale of Nottingswood*, demonstrates your skill as a story-writer, but the Audiobook—which you narrate—truly shows off your skill as a story-teller. What was it like narrating your own book?

It was wonderful. It allowed me to tell the story the way I hope people read the story. It allowed me to explore even further the emotions of the book, and, in a sense, become the true story-teller my mom inspired me to be those many years ago.

10. If you were to do a full Audiobook production of the story, what actors do you hear playing the parts?

*Hugh Laurie would be the Narrator. Hands down, my first choice. A very close second would be Alan Rickman. If I had unlimited funds, I'd do two versions: one with Hugh, and one with Alan. They both have such unique and distinct styles that each actor's interpretation would both underscore and highlight the variety of notes and colors within the novelette. Kind of like neopolitan ice cream. You get to eat ice cream but with the flavor of rich chocolate **and** sweet strawberry at the same time. Sorry, vanilla. You have to stay in the carton.*

11. You say *The Tale of Nottingswood* must be heard as well as read. What do you mean by that?

This book, I believe, is meant to be read out loud. It's that kind of book. Because of the rhyming structure, it can be overwhelming to sit down and read all at once if you're not used to it. That's why the audiobook is perfect.

I can see family traditions of parents and children sitting down as one narrates while everyone else picks their favorite characters to read. I'm actually preparing a scripted edition to make public and private readings easier and more fun.

12. You give inspirational talks about self-acceptance. Give an example.

Here are the Cliff's Notes of one of the stories I tell students.

When I was 10 years old, I wanted a pair of pink Converse high tops. My mom wouldn't get them for me because she knew I'd get teased. Well, I begged her so much, that she met me half way and got me a knock off pair.

And she was right. The teasing started and got to the point that I tucked them away in the closet never to pull them out again. It was at that time in my life that I started being who everyone else wanted me to be instead of who I truly was. I was miserable.

Seven years later, we went on a family vacation to the U.K. I did all I could not to look like a tourist. I wanted to look cool. I wanted to fit in. I didn't want to look excited at seeing new sights; I didn't want my picture taken, let alone hold the camera. I was miserable, until....

We went to the coolest castle ruins in Scotland. Dunnottar Castle. I explored. I borrowed the camera to take pictures, then I wanted my sister to take pictures of me. I was having fun. I was happy.

Leaving Dunnottar Castle, I bent down to tie my shoe on the way to the car. After arguing the merits of trying to fit in against the fun I was having as a tourist, I finally said to myself, "Dang it, I'm a tourist, and I'm gonna act like a tourist." I stood up a new man, a happy man, because I accepted the fact that I was a tourist. From that point on, it was the best vacation ever.

Today, I wear pink Converse on special occasions as a symbol, a reminder of the lesson I learned that day in Scotland. Therein lies a key to happiness.

13. You're very open about your battles with depression and suicide when you were young. Any fears about being so "confessional" in your professional talks?

No one was open with talking about these issues in a real and direct way when I was growing up. I probably wouldn't have made some of the decisions I made if the topic had been more understood and less taboo.

I see my job now, when I speak, is to give people, especially young people, a sense of reality of their own mortality; a sense of who they truly are and how they want to be remembered. The only way to drive that point home is to help them trust you. And they don't fully trust you, unless you demonstrate that you trust them first. And you can't demonstrate that trust unless you are open, honest and vulnerable with them. Only then will they listen.

14. What do you like about writing? What do you not like?

Writing is time consuming, and I'm not a patient person. That, for me, is the big negative. You also have to be very disciplined, and I'm not that either.

What I like most about it, though, is it allows me to empty out my head on paper. It forces me to think through my thoughts, and offers me another outlet for my creativity. And if the end result impacts someone else as a result, then that's more than I could ever ask for.

15. You admit to being a writer who hates to read. That can't be true. What do you mean when you say that?

I mean just that. I hate reading. But that's only because very few books, articles, and stories can successfully hook me and keep my attention. My time is very valuable, and if a writer can't hook, line and sink me, I'm gone. There are bloggers I love to follow but if their commentary edges beyond 300 – 400 words, I'm skimming through to the end.

The only novelists who have ever kept me reading are Dickens, Orson Scott Card, and Stephen King. I'm sure there have been others, but I don't recall them at the moment. It's the same with non-fiction. I have to be hungry for the subject, and the author needs to get to the point without superfluous beating-a-dead-horse exposition in order for me keep reading.

The curse of ADD.

16. When did you discover your knack for writing.

It was when I received accolades for writing an ending to a book I never read.

It was eleventh grad Honors English class. We had to read Grapes of Wrath. I couldn't get past the first few chapters. Our final assignment was to write a final chapter to the book from where it left off.

Uh oh.

So, I reviewed the first few chapters, read the last chapter, then, capturing the style of Steinbeck, wrote a second ending that brought it full circle with the beginning, and receive an A+++. My teacher asked me to read it to the class, and it was displayed in the classroom next to a few others.

Consider this my official public confession.

17. What are you working on now?

*Marketing **The Tale of Nottingswood**.*

I've had readers, especially young readers, begging me to do a follow up to Nottingswood. But, it is a stand-alone tale. Although, there is another story I have started that keeps with the same "Tim Burton meets Dr. Seuss" style, but it's much darker. Then I have a title for a third book, but that's all it is, just a title.