

Lisa Milter

Pat Hastings

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How J.F. Riordan Writes the Damn Book

Many typical writers have a strict regime and have followed a literature-centered pattern all their lives, including pursuing a chronological writing process and participating in any and all book clubs. Author J.F. Riordan is someone who shamelessly writes the story before the outline and calls herself a book club dropout.

Riordan describes her writing style as unconventional and not necessarily following a specific formula. This is something she prides herself on and encourages young writers to try as well.

“You don’t have to listen to other people’s styles and them telling you how to write. You need to respect your own brain, your own style and your own magic that makes you who you really are,” Riordan says.

Instead of having Microsoft Word open on her laptop, Riordan says that often the most important tools for crafting a story are an old cardboard box and a pen. Riordan starts by drawing an object, such as a boat, to symbolize the scene that comes to her out of nowhere and that she says “has to happen.” She then draws other objects that lead to other events until she has what she calls a “map” of her story. Once the map is complete, her main task is to link these disparate things with a plot, then characters, then details.

“I just go with it. The ideas and characters present themselves in a way to me that is completely subconscious. It is almost magical to me,” Riordan says.

Unlike numerous readers and writers, Riordan also holds the unpopular opinion that escapist, dystopian literature is dark and boring. Riordan says she wanted to write a book that included many of the same serious and important themes escapist novels often contain. However, her spin on it was to make it lighthearted while still having the raw aspects of real life.

“Just because something is important and valuable doesn’t mean we have to be solemn about it. Those mixtures of joy and seriousness I think are what I think make life fun, so that’s my little attempt to change that dynamic in the world of novels,” Riordan says.

Riordan’s unusual and creative way of turning pictures on a piece of cardboard into 478 pages of cohesive thoughts has proven successful for her. Although she was worried at first about how she would find an agent, publish her book and promote it, Riordan encouraged herself with a motto she still uses to this day in all of her writing: “Write the damn book.”

With her very own catchphrase, Riordan shows there is no correct way nor a specific formula to write a good novel, and that going crazy about minor details and worrying about publishing won’t make the novel any better. What Riordan says writers have complete control over is to tell the story in their own way. After all, Riordan asks, “What do you really know except yourself?”