

Exclusive Q&A with author Christina Baker Kline

"Books are powerful tools that not only educate but serve as necessary reminders of our shared humanity."

In an exclusive Q&A just for Room to Read Book Club members, Room to Read Author Advocate, Christina Baker Kline, talks about finding inspiration and learning to take herself seriously as a write - and offers some kind words of encouragement for young learners.

Author
Advocate



**Christina
Baker Kline**



Q: What inspired you to become a writer?

A: I suppose I always wanted to be a writer. I am terrible at many things, but I do have one real skill: I'm quite a good editor, and I enjoy it. So though at twelve I imagined myself as a writer, by eighteen I more realistically (and quite happily) hoped to become a book or magazine editor. But a teacher's encouragement in college led me to eventually apply to MFA programs, and with two free years to write I finished a draft of what became my first novel, *Sweet Water*. For the next twenty years I made a living writing books, editing, and teaching. It wasn't until I published my fifth novel, *Orphan Train*, that I was able to concentrate on writing and writing-related engagements without the imperative to earn money in other ways. (I do still teach workshops and mentor emerging writers now and then.)

The hard thing about becoming a writer is that you have to take yourself very seriously before anyone else does. When you're starting out, you don't have a lot of outside validation. You're the one setting all the rules and limits, trying to create a mental and emotional space in which you feel worthy of taking the time and making the sacrifices to breathe a work into being. I tell my students that you become an author when you have published, but you're a writer when you take yourself seriously as a creative person.

Q: How have books helped expand your view of the world?

A: The early 20th-century English children's writer Beatrix Potter's animal-themed stories, perfect for little hands, are often wrongly viewed as charming and sweet. (Her 23 titles include *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, and *The Tale of Tom Kitten*.) In fact, they are dark, twisted, and subversive, and I was obsessed with them growing up. Like Grimm's fairy tales and Mother Goose rhymes, they grapple with mortality, danger, and other complex realities. They were rocket fuel for my imagination.

In graduate school I read the three plays that make up Aeschylus's epic *Oresteia* - *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Furies*. "The house itself, could it take voice, might speak aloud and plain" - these words, spoken by a watchman at the beginning of the trilogy, encapsulate some of the major themes and preoccupations of my novels: family history, hidden stories, the quest for a place to call home.

Q: What words of encouragement would you share with young learners around the world?

A: Be a sponge. Soak up everything: words of all kinds, music, art, film, dance. Find a way to express yourself creatively. Take chances: apply for things. Seize opportunities to travel. And here's the most important thing: when you put yourself forward, you risk rejection. People -- many people, probably -- will say no to you. Now and then there'll be a yes. Follow the yes! By which I mean: listen to the positive voices. Take them seriously. Believe the people who believe in you.

Q: What do you consider essential to your writing practice?

Ernest Hemingway famously said, "Write drunk, edit sober." Whether he meant this literally or metaphorically, I took the advice to heart. I try to write as quickly as I can to keep the editor's voice in my head at bay. Then I revise ruthlessly. At some point I am thoroughly sick of the book and decide that it's terrible and will never be published. I've learned that this moment is just part of my process. I think of Winnie-the-Pooh stuck in the rabbit hole: he has come too far to go back, so he must go forward, however impossible it seems. At a certain point in the process of writing a novel it feels that way to me. Every time. The single most important thing is to KEEP GOING. Many extremely talented writers I know and have taught can't seem to finish a manuscript. They abandon it and start over, then reach that point again with the next book. The dream is so much more perfect than the reality.

The writer Anne Lamott tells a story about when she was a kid and her little brother was overwhelmed by a school project about birds. Their father's gentle advice: "Just take it bird by bird, buddy." That's useful to remember. The secret is not to get overwhelmed by the big picture.

Q: What is the last book you read?

A: The 1926 novel *Cheri*, by Colette. I picked it up after reading an interview with Andrew Sean Greer in which he said that he originally modeled his wickedly funny, Pulitzer-prize-winning novel *Less* on it. I'm always interested in how writers influence and inspire each other!

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