

Author Spotlight with

Michael J. Daley



Your previous books were for intermediate readers. What are the special challenges of writing an early reader chapter book?

Finding a story that fits the form and has humor and emotion. In that way, the challenge is similar to picture books or any short form, like poetry. The story just has to fit in that small frame of word length.

On a more personal level, overcoming fear! Arnold Lobel is my model. His early readers are masterpieces. With those amazing stories to compare to, nothing I set on paper ever seemed adequate. Thank goodness Pinch and Dash came along with their zany word play to rescue me. The stories were just so much fun to write, I forgot about being intimidated. Not that they came easy, mind you—I figure there are a few years and several dozen drafts in that particular pot of soup!

Your wife is also an author of children's books. What's it like having two children's book authors in the house?

Yes, Jessie Haas. We've been together since before graduating college. We had the neat experience last year of having our very first early readers published at the same time. Jessie's is called *Bramble and Maggie: Horse Meets Girl*. One of her favorite subjects!

As for having two writers in the house, well—tricky business, that. On the one hand, there is the enormous plus of a shared passion for storytelling and the writing experience. We understand what our jobs are all about. I imagine a doctor and a plumber, married, must work at understanding the nuances of each others labors. Jessie and I can share the ups and downs, the frustrations and joys of the process—like the thrill when a new story idea hits, or the solution to a plot problem comes along to make your day, or when you craft a beautiful sentence. On the other hand, it can be really trying when one of you is in the flow and having a great day with words and the other isn't. Oh, that's hard to live with! And the biggest danger of all: "I just finished this piece and it's wonderful and don't you want to hear it?" There is only one answer, learned by bitter trial and error, and that is "NO." Nothing is worse than someone wanting you to love their every word and having to point out a flaw. We save those encounters for our writing group because, of course, nothing is ever perfect and we believe in striving for perfection.



Tell us about the space where you write.

I write in a 5 foot by 5 foot square tower room on the tiny house that Jessie and I built by hand in the woods of Westminster, Vermont. It's just up the hill from the family farm where Jessie grew up. My computer runs on solar electricity. When I'm writing science fiction, I often imagine I'm in a space capsule. All my life I have loved houses with towers and wanted one for myself. It's quite a thing to find out you can realize a dream like that by building it yourself.

Illustration copyright © 2012 by Thomas F. Yezerski from *Pinch and Dash Make Soup*

You are a science fiction fan, and your previous children's books are influenced by science fiction. Why the change with the *Pinch and Dash* books?

I am a total *Star Trek* (the original show—yeah!) raised sci-fi fan and ever since I first started to write as a hobby—in seventh grade—I've created science fiction tales. But I am also passionate about science fact. Before my book *Space Station Rat* came along, I had written three works on energy subjects. *Pinch and Dash*, as I mentioned, came in answer to my respect and fascination for the early reader format which gave me a yearning to write one, if I could. Story ideas come in so many ways . . . for instance, I just finished a middle grade novel about a young boy raising a blue jay. That is based on a true life experience Jessie and I had raising a baby blue jay. It has taken me more than twenty years, though, to turn real life into a fictional tale that captures that experience for young readers. So I have lots of ideas that aren't all inspired by science fiction. *Pinch and Dash* came to me in the kitchen of old friends who have a set of measuring spoons labeled pinch, dash, and smidgen.

You are a mentor to young writers. What advice do you most commonly give them?

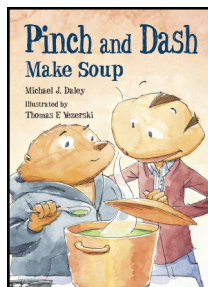
Actions have consequences. It's amazing how kids, whose lives are full of the give and take with parents and siblings, can forget this simple fact. My character fails math because my plot requires them to, yet when the report card comes home, my character can still play video games with his friend all night long because that's what I want him to do . . . I don't think so! Unless you are writing absurdist stories, one of the things that makes the reading experience so utterly absorbing is the "willing suspension of disbelief," as Coleridge so definitively put it. Nothing destroys that quicker than failing to apply real life human nature within the framework of your fiction, whether it is fantasy, school stories, or alien beings.

Besides that, I like to temper the typical adage "Write what you know" with the more fruitful "Write what you love. Write what heats up your imagination." And I point to my own science fiction stories where I write about a boy traveling to the moon and a rat created in a test tube—things I could never know except through my passion to imagine them into being.

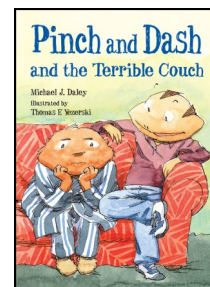
The *Pinch and Dash* books allude to or mention cooking—the names of the characters, the tinkering with the soup, the homemade lemonade. Do you like to cook?

Ah, the lemonade whose "pucker gives you pluck!" That was one of my most fun moments of writing *Pinch and Dash and the Terrible Couch*. I not only like to cook, I love to cook. My mother's side of the family is Italian, and every meal would end with wondering what would be eaten at the next meal . . . wonderful! And the food was so good. My wife, Jessie, shares my passion for cooking as well. A close friend and food writer claims we have some of the most free-ranging palates she's aware of. There are always a half-dozen new ethnic cookbooks on our library shelf to sustain us through the long winter evenings here in Vermont while we think about what's for dinner tomorrow!

By Michael J. Daley



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