

‘Why I wrote’ by Justin Cronin

You write the book that asks to be written, and *THE PASSAGE* asked me to write it on a series of long jogs in the fall of 2005, taken in the company of my daughter, Iris, age eight, who rode beside me on her bicycle.

For many years, running has been part of my writing ritual. I do my best creative thinking while running, which I have come to understand as a form of self-hypnosis. It’s where I get my ideas, but not just my ideas; on the best days, whole paragraphs seem to drop into my head. I like to say that I write while running; at the computer, I’m just typing.

That fall, four years ago, my daughter asked if she could come along. We had done this from time to time, back when she was first leaning to ride a two-wheeler, and I’d always enjoyed it, even if her presence was a bit of a distraction from the mental work I was actually doing. But it was September, blazingly hot, and the novel I was working on was in a bit of a stall. Sure, I said. Get your stuff.

To understand this story, a person would need to know something about my daughter. Iris is simply the most voracious literary consumer I have ever encountered. She reads two or three books a day and has since she was little. She reads while eating, bathing, and walking the dog. She reads while watching television (I’m not sure how), in the backseat of the car, and standing in line at the movies; I have actually seen her reading on a roller coaster. There is always a book somewhere on or near her person, and she goes to sleep every night listening to audiobooks—in other words, she reads while sleeping, too. Once, just to satisfy my curiosity, I surreptitiously timed the rate at which she moved through the pages and discovered she was reading at twice the rate I do. I am probably the only parent in the history of the world who has uttered this sentence: “Your mother and I have decided that, as your punishment, you will not be allowed to read a book for the rest of the week.”

In sum, Iris is the reader every writer longs for—when she loves a book, she loves it unreservedly—but she is also the critic we all fear, capable of skewering a novel she doesn’t like with the most withering sarcasm. Her verbal parodies of Jane Austen, for instance, a writer I am certain she will someday like but for now considers pompously dull, are scarily dead-on.

That day as we set out, our conversation naturally turned to books and writing, and Iris made a confession: your books, daddy, are boring. She said this offhandedly, as if she were telling me something I probably already knew, which I took to mean that my novels were too grown up for her, and dealt with subjects in which she had no interest. I might have been offended but I was mostly surprised; I didn’t know she’d read them. (I was quickly calculating what inappropriate material she would have encountered in their pages.) But when I asked her about this, she said she hadn’t read them, not exactly; she knew my books were boring, she explained, from their covers, and the summaries on the flaps. Well, that’s literary novels, I explained, relieved. Sometimes it’s hard to say exactly what they’re about, in so many words. To which my daughter rolled her eyes. That’s what I mean, said Iris. Boring.

“Well what do you want me to write about?” I asked.

She took a moment to think. We were running and riding, side by side, moving down the flat, wide sidewalk of our neighborhood in the autumn heat.

“A girl who saves the world,” she said.

I had to laugh. Of course that’s what she’d want me to write about. Not just a town, say, or a small city, but the entire world!

“That’s a tall order,” I said. “Anything else?”

She thought another moment. “It should have one character with red hair,” said my daughter, the redhead. “And...vampires.”

This was before every teenage girl in America had gone crazy for vampires. I knew absolutely nothing about them, beyond the common lore.

“The redhead I get. Why vampires?”

She responded with a shrug. “They’re interesting. A book needs something interesting in it.” It was a classic dare, and I knew it. Writer Rule #1 is Never Let Anyone Else Tell You What to Write. But I also knew we had five hot miles ahead of us.

“OK,” I said. “Let’s do it together. We’ll work it out together as we go.”

“Like a game, you mean,” Iris said.

“Sure. We can toss ideas around, see if we can work it into a story. Who knows? Maybe it will be good and I can write it. “

She agreed, and across that fall to pass the time of our afternoon run-rides, we began to formulate the plot of a novel, one hour each day. An orphan girl (her), and an FBI agent who befriends and fathers her (me). A medical experiment in lengthening human lifespan, and a global catastrophe. A hundred years of lost time, and a mountain outpost in California where the last of the human race awaits the end, until a day when a girl—that same girl—appears out the wilderness, to save the human race. Each afternoon after she came home from school we would pick up where we’d left off, and gradually the story and its details came into shape. In the evenings, we’d tell my wife about what we’d come up with, and so she became part of the process too, blessing or dismissing our ideas, offering some of her own to fill the spaces. I kept saying, Isn’t this a gas? I can’t believe how good our daughter is at this. I had no sense that this was any type of story in particular, literary or commercial, for any particular audience beyond ourselves, and I didn’t care; we were just having fun, telling a story around the campfire. Despite what I had said, I had no intention of actually writing the thing, writing and talking being in the end two entirely different matters, one much more work than the other.

And then a funny thing happened. As the weeks went by, I began to think this story actually could be a book, and that it was actually a better book, a much better book, than the one I was actually supposed to be writing. And not just one book: saving the world seemed like the kind of undertaking that would take three books to accomplish. The story that became THE PASSAGE had begun to fill my head, to breathe and walk and talk—to be populated, as someone once said, by “warm new beings” I actually believed in. Amy and Wolgast. Peter and Alicia (the redhead Iris had requested). Lacey and Richards and Grey and Sara and Michael-the-Circuit—a character who is a kind of boy-Iris, actually, and very much her creation. I had been a literary novelist all my professional life, with a literary novelist’s habits and interests; but I had cut my reader’s teeth on plenty of genre fiction—adventure novels, science fiction, westerns, espionage. Enough to know that in the end it’s how you write the thing that matters, and if you love it. Be interesting, Iris had told me. There’s no harm in it, and your reader will thank you. It seemed like good advice. For three months, Iris and I traded ideas back and forth like a ball we were moving downfield; by December, when the cold weather came and her bicycle went into the garage, we had the plot worked out, right down to the final scene. I felt sad, as if something wonderful was ending, and I decided not to let it end; I sat at my computer and began to write an outline, so I wouldn’t forget it.

And when that was done, I decided I would write the first chapter. Just to see how it felt.

And so on.