

Talking about, sigh, the mail

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I said a while back, in a previous post, that I would discuss fan mail. And I've put it off because it is difficult. It's like the movie star who moans, "Oh, it's so hard to be beautiful..." Yeah, right.

It is very hard to complain about fan mail.

And most of it, to be honest, is downright wonderful. Here are excerpts from some recent e-mails:

...somehow I feel my relationship with my older daughter has been different since she devoured your novel and we have discussed it, and I feel more confident about the things I want to accomplish as a teacher...

...I just want to let you know how much your wonderful books meant to me as a child and still mean to me today. I spent over ten years in foster care, which meant moving dozens of times and losing a good chunk of my personal effects, but never once did I lose or leave behind anything written by you...

*...In the fall of 1996 I was forced to read *The Giver*. Not being much of a reader, I didn't have a desire to read it. But as I was lead through the life of Jonas, i found myself not able to put the book down. I got lost in its pages and my overactive imagination took over. I found a number of truths in *The Giver*, even in 7th grade. It became a yearly tradition for me to read the book, and each year I found more and more truth. Jonas and I have become pretty good friend over the years...*

Getting heartfelt e-mails, or letters, like those is a wonderful gift from readers.

The problem arises when the e-mail mailbox is deluged with 50, 60, sometimes 100 or more e-mails on the same day from kids in the same school or class who have been assigned to "write-a-letter-to-the-author." Usually those kids have all read the same book, so their questions have a sameness (sorry) to them, and there is no way that I can write an original, spritely, personal reply to each one. Picture trying to write 100, 150 letters a day EVERY day! Can't be done.

Yet if I send a form reply, which I often have to do, the kids are offended. One boy wrote back and called me a "lazy bum" after he and his classmate both got identical responses. I replied to him and told him that if I really were a lazy bum, I wouldn't have READ all of their e-mails. (See? I sometimes sink to a very low level myself!)

Once, when after answering 63 e-mails, I contacted the teacher and suggested that she not do that again, and to me or any other author she should, instead, send one letter for the entire group, with a few questions, making it manageable. But I got an angry reply from her that she would never use my books again in her class.

Recently, when a child got an impersonal form reply from me, her mother wrote angrily and said she would like to rip off my face.

That answered the question for me of who are those people who go on the Jerry Springer show. But it did not answer the question of how to deal with the mail.

So I will just bumble along, I guess. But at least here - for those of you who will read this, and who might be teachers - please know that it is very heart-warming to hear from your students. But better to compile their comments into ONE e-mail so that I can send a fairly personal and timely reply.

The other night, in New York, I happened to be walking past a theater from which Julia Roberts was about to emerge after performing in a play. There were crowds - HORDES - of people

pushing and shoving and waving cameras and calling her name. These were *adults*—presumably intelligent beings. I hurried on past, but couldn't stop thinking about what it must be like for her, how horrible that she can't walk from her work to the waiting car, to go home to her husband and kids, without facing that mindless, frightening mob that calls itself "fans."

Writers don't have to go through that, thank God, and for the most part, writers' fans are not sub-human and screaming. Still, any profession that has a public side to it does take on the demands and expectations from that public. We deal with it - and I do speak, here, for several other writers as well, because I have solicited their opinions on the issue - as best we can, with as much graciousness as we can muster, and with gratitude to each young person who has a genuine response to something we've written.

Okay, now back to work. There is more mail arriving at this moment.

Tags: Untagged