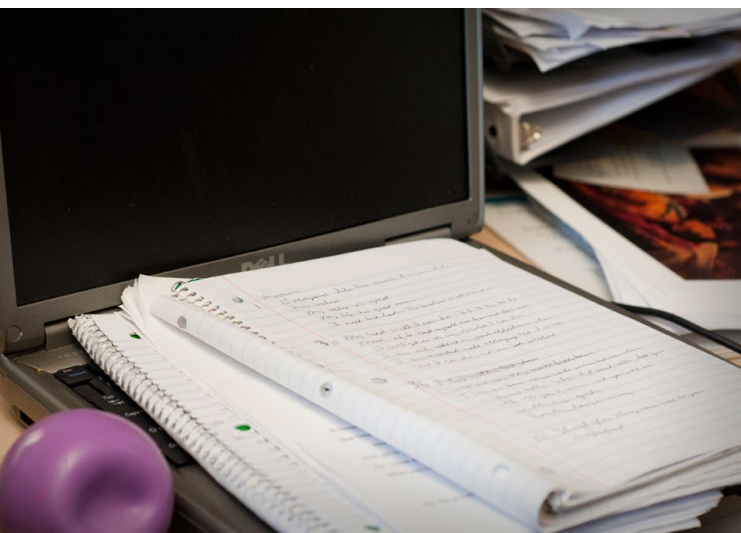




They sent me copies of the joke books and I didn't recognize any of the jokes, which was a little odd, since I had read a lot of joke books, and if they'd been collected, I should have been able to recognize some of the jokes. So I called them and asked them if they wanted original jokes. They said yes, they'd prefer that. So I said, "Oh, okay." That was one of the best things that happened to me because it forced me to learn how to reverse-engineer writing. I went and studied joke books. I figured out what the formulas were and wrote jokes. The first eight were on *Reading Rainbow*. Five of them were International Reading Association Children's Choice books, which made me totally discredit the book awards process. You have these goofy little joke books and people win national awards? There's no objectivity involved in the selection process.

Which project have you had the most fun with?

I've got a project right now we're shopping around. The original title is *The Insanely Ridiculously Dangerous Book for Daring Boys and Girls*. It's an accumulation of my best stuff from over



thirty years put into a really bizarre format with a bizarre premise and it's just a really weird book. It's more descriptive of who I am and it's just very bizarre. So far, some publishers have been interested, but with publishers, mostly their response to it is, "Huh?" My agent really likes it. He thinks it's brilliant. That's why I like my agent. But the publishers just...it's before its time.

I'm sure it will come out soon.

I'm sure it will. Somebody will recognize its genius.

What's your favorite published book?

That's a question that everybody asks all the time and the standard answer is "I can't tell you," because it's a lot like asking which of my children is my favorite. I've got five children and at one time or another, each of them is my favorite, but I never tell which one it is for two reasons. First, because it changes all the time, and second, because I don't want my other kids to be sad if they're not my favorite kid. So I don't tell which book is my favorite, because it changes all the time, and I don't want my other books to be sad if they're not my favorite book. Honestly, I do have some that I like particularly. Some that I like to read might be a good way to answer that: I like to read *Bertie Was a Watchdog*, *Once There Was a Bull... (frog)*, and *A Very Hairy Scary Story*. Short, funny, and punchy are the kind I like the most.

How has your writing evolved over the years?

I think, if anything, I'm more interested in pushing boundaries and exploring and trying to do the impossible. I like the challenge of doing something that's never been done before. I've got several manuscripts that haven't been published that are really bizarre, like the one I told you about. I've got one that's the story of the tortoise and the hare, where if you read the text front to back, the tortoise wins the race. If you read the same text from back to front, the hare wins the race. It's an exercise in ambiguity. Then I've got another one called *Oddly Hippo*, where you actually turn the words upside down. If you turn the words upside down, there are words. So the story can actually be told with the words upside down and it's still a story. And I've got a bunch of other odd things I'm trying. What's the weirdest thing you can do with a book?

At the suggestion of an LDS publisher, I wrote the Quad board book—the entire Triple Combination in thirty-two lines. Eight lines for the Bible (the whole Bible—that's four lines for the Old Testament and four lines for the New Testament), eight lines for the Book of Mormon, eight lines for the D&C, and eight lines for the Pearl of

Great Price. It turned out pretty well. The publisher decided not to publish it after all for financial reasons, but I love those kinds of challenges.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

I was just asked this, and what I said was, “Quit, unless you can’t. Then do the work.” They wanted my advice in ten words or less.

The standard advice—and it does work—is read a lot and write a lot. A lot of writers jump the gun and spend a lot of their time on the marketing before they’re actually ready to sell their book. I know I did. I would have been better off if I’d focused on the writing first. Learn your craft. There are a lot of workshops and conferences. Network.

And don’t do it for the wrong reasons. Don’t do it because you think you’re going to get rich, or because you want the fame and the glamor, or because it’s going to solve your problems or justify your life, because it will probably do none of those. It will just be more frustration.

If you do it because you love it, because you like the creative process, because you want to do it for your family, or because you have something to say, then you’re more likely to stick with it long enough to actually get published. If you do it just to get published, you’ll probably realize really quickly that it’s a frustrating job. Anything in the arts is frustrating because it’s hard to actually make a success out of it.

If you don’t love it, find something you love—and that’s just fine. I don’t think there is anything more important about being an artist than about being, say, a plumber or a teacher or an auto-repair person. In fact, some of these things are even more important, I think. Indoor plumbing is good.

How has the gospel influenced your writing?

It’s influenced how I live as a writer. I believe in the power of literature to influence people, especially children. I think it’s important that we provide good literature for young kids, so I do as much as I can to promote children’s writers and writing for children in the Church and in Utah. I’m involved in a lot of projects, a lot of listservs, and a lot of conferences. It’s just important for me to do what I can to help Utah writers. The more successful the LDS writers are, the more people hear about us. They become curious. They explore. If nothing



else, they have a more positive attitude toward the Church.

Not everyone I work with is LDS. To help good, solid, talented, moral people get involved with writing for children and to get them in positions where they can help influence is a form of missionary work. I’ve got a lot of writer friends who are not LDS but who have come out to Utah for writing conferences who become very positive about the Church. They haven’t joined the Church, but they are very friendly and they help LDS writers, and when people say negative things about the Church, they challenge them and set them straight. So I think that’s an important thing too. It’s not actually the content—most of my writing is relatively non-religious, although I am doing some things for the LDS market.

Do you have any fun stories that you can share about your writing experiences?

I’ve always thought it would be cool to be banned, because you’re not really a serious author unless somebody’s tried to ban you somewhere. I’ve got a book, *Pig Pigger Piggest*, where pigs marry witches. I was on a three-and-a-half month trip throughout the United States with my family, doing school visits and touring. We went to Greenville, South Carolina, for a couple of days of school visits there. This is home of Bob Jones University, deep in the Bible Belt, during the time when Harry Potter was being challenged all throughout South Carolina. I went to the school, and it was so religiously conservative that the principal said grace in the library during lunch. You’d never get away with that in Utah. So I thought, “This is my chance to be banned.” *Pig Pigger Piggest* turned out to be their favorite book, and I thought, “I will never get banned.” I was actually quite pleased. ■