



# Born to Write

Patrick Jones and Ken Rasak

**Editor's Note:** Patrick Jones is known as the guru of young adult library services because he inspires other YA librarians. Here he takes *VOYA* readers along on his arduous journey from YA guru to YA novelist. It is fitting that this issue of *VOYA* contains the third edition of The Perfect Tens booklist, which Jones originated and then bequeathed to us.

Whenever I hear young adult novelists speak at conferences, I'm skeptical of claims that their characters took on a life of their own. Yet midway through my first work of fiction, **Things Change**, I experienced that very phenomenon myself. Even after the novel's spring 2004 publication, I still hear from my protagonists, Johanna and Paul, and their friends, Kara and Brad. When *VOYA*'s editor asked me for an article related to the release of **Things Change**, I decided to interview my characters rather than be interviewed myself, while tracing my novel's seventeen-year history.

**Things Change** is the story of Johanna, an overachieving, highly intelligent high school junior who falls in love with Paul, a senior known more for cracking jokes than cracking open books. These opposites attract, but soon Johanna's world is turned upside down by an obsessive first love with Paul, an angry young man with

**Below:** Patrick Then: In Ainsworth High School's Aura yearbook, class of 1979.

**Far Right:** Patrick Now: Still with Bruce.

**PHOTO CREDIT:** Erica Klein



deep psychological problems. Although he masks his angst with humor, he is prone to violence, and the novel largely concerns Johanna's response to this complicated, dangerous, and damaging relationship.

*I met with Johanna and her friend Kara at Kara's small but artfully decorated apartment. Johanna is visiting her hometown of Pontiac, Michigan, on spring break. She's a sophomore at Columbia University, majoring in journalism. Kara works at a clothing store in the nearby Great Lake Crossing Mall and does some modeling on the side.*

**Patrick:** Johanna, let's start with you. When you reflect on events in the book now, how does it make you feel?

**Johanna:** Old. (Both women laugh.)

**Kara:** Tell me about it!

**Johanna:** I think spending the last year and a half going to school in New York City has opened my eyes. I was very much a little girl from a small town when I met Paul.

**Patrick:** But you grew up quickly because of that relationship, right?

**Johanna:** Yes. I learned a lot about myself. When I graduated from—I was going to say "high school," but I think the School of Paul might be more appropriate—I had a better idea than most girls about how complicated life could be.

**Patrick:** So you look back at Paul as a sort of teacher?

**Johanna:** Before I met him, I was a very serious person. I guess I still am, but now I see the absurdity of people and situations. There are times when I will be in the middle of a boring lecture at college or I'll overhear a pretentious conversation at a coffee house and Paul's voice just comes into my head, mocking everyone and everything, until I'm laughing out loud to myself.

**Patrick:** But the humor was just a mask for a darker side, right?

**Johanna:** Definitely. His inability to control his humor at times was part of his overall inability to control himself.

**Patrick:** What else did you learn from your relationship?

**Johanna:** It sounds so dispassionate to talk about him that way, like I was taking notes or something.

**Patrick:** No, I took all the notes. Seventeen years worth of notes!

**Johanna:** (Laughs.) Right! In high school a year makes a big difference, and Paul was a senior and I was a junior. Also, I was



inexperienced, not just sexually, but emotionally. He was my first love and I don't regret that, but when I think about our time together, I realize that he was in the driver's seat, figuratively and literally.

**Patrick:** *When did you realize that he was in control of your relationship?*

**Johanna:** You told me in the first line in the book when I say, "I want you to kiss me."

**Patrick:** *How could I forget it? It was one of only three lines that survived my first draft!*

**Johanna:** Yeah, well, it killed me at the time when he wouldn't kiss me, but that's how it was from the beginning. He always called the shots. He needed to be in control.

**Kara:** And yet you broke up with him, finally.

**Johanna:** My head knew it was over, but my heart was still catching up.

**Kara:** And you still thought he could change and that you could help him do it.

**Johanna:** Yes, until I learned from you about his other girlfriend. Every apology he offered was persuasive, but his strength was making you believe he had it in him to be a better person. I was always looking at the person I thought he was and wanted him to be.

**Kara:** Well, first love is delusional.

**Patrick:** *Exactly. It's an intense period in a young person's life. That was partly why I wrote the book, to capture the intensity of that experience.*

**Johanna:** I'm sure there will be people who read the book and wonder why this smart girl, a good student with a bright future and a stable home life, would have a love affair with this loser. Why would she let him hit and humiliate her?

**Patrick:** *When you look back, what do you think attracted you to Paul?*

**Johanna:** Looking back, I realize I was drawn to Paul in part to spite my mother. She controlled me just as much as Paul did. She used her wits; he used his fists.

**Kara:** Plus Paul had lots of other problems, right?

**Johanna:** His drinking, his abuse, his father was the same. I was out of my depth when it came to all that. I thought love would solve all my problems, not create new ones.

**Patrick:** *I quoted you in the book, saying: "My experience with Paul certainly taught me that I was far from perfect and that in lots of things, like matters of the heart, being smart really doesn't help all that much."*

**Johanna:** It's easy for a smart person to rationalize anything she wants badly enough.

**Patrick:** *Still, not every girl has the wherewithal to end an abusive relationship like you did. What advice would you give to someone stuck in that situation?*

**Johanna:** I can hear Paul's voice right now: "If I want advice, I'll order Chinese and read the fortune cookie" or going on about being the low mein on the totem pole.

**Kara:** Yeah, that's Paul all right.

**Johanna:** When you're in the midst of an obsessive relationship like we were, you are under a form of hypnosis. If it's a bad relationship such as Paul and I had, then you're lucky if the hypnotist somehow says the magic word and breaks the spell for you.

**Kara:** You needed to find the magic words inside yourself.

**Johanna:** So Patrick, why did you decide to write all these words about Paul and me?

**Patrick:** *I was reading a lot of YA lit back in 1987, when you were born. I think anyone who reads a lot thinks about writing. My goal was to write something that wasn't too preachy or sappy with the usual happy ending. Once I started, I knew I was onto an*

*interesting subject that hadn't been looked at in YA lit. But more than that, I thought your story and Paul's story told a lot of truths about teen relationships. Growing up in Flint, Michigan, I knew lots of people like you and Paul, but I didn't read about them in books.*

**Johanna:** Well, thank you for letting me tell my story. I guess in some ways, I should also thank Paul one day.

**Kara:** After what he did to you?

**Johanna:** That's in the past, but I'm trying to imagine who I would be if I hadn't met him. It was because of Paul, faults and all, that I found within myself the resolve to be who I am and not who others wanted me to be. I'd also thank him for being my first love, who I will always treasure in my heart, for helping me to learn how to laugh.

**Kara:** Well, it looks like you got the last one.

**Johanna:** But it isn't funny; I feel sorry for Paul.

**Kara:** You should feel sorrier for his new girlfriend. And you should tell her.

**Johanna:** *(Starts to cry.)* You see, I still get upset thinking about it. Let's stop, okay?

**Patrick:** *Thanks for your time.*

*Next I go to meet Paul and his best friend, Brad, at their favorite haunt, Supreme Donut. There is a "Going Out of Business" sign on the front door, and I enter to find Brad there waiting; he is on spring break from his junior year at Stanford. Paul is running late, so we chat. Brad shares his concern that Paul is exactly where I left him: working at a minimum wage job, drinking too much, and promising to change. A rusty Firebird rumbles into the parking lot and Paul emerges to join us.*

**Patrick:** *Paul, I've heard you're not happy with how I told your story. Is that true?*

**Paul:** *(Overturms white coffee cup, slams it on the table.)* What does it take to get service in this joint? No wonder they're going out of business! Just like this city.

**Brad:** Your book wasn't very flattering to Paul, or to me, for that matter.

**Patrick:** *What do you mean? I try to show Paul as a likeable and—*

**Brad:** You make him out to be a monster and me his Igor-like co-conspirator.

**Patrick:** *Actually, I don't think that's true. Paul does some unpleasant things, but he is a sympathetic character, and Brad, while you suspect his bad behavior, it's clear that you protect him out of the decency of your friendship.*

**Paul:** "Unpleasant things?" You make me out to be a monster and you know it. What I want to know is why? I think that book you did on R. L. Stine went to your head. You wound up writing a horror story.

**Patrick:** *That's not fair.*

**Paul:** You deciding what is and isn't fair is like Rosie O'Donnell offering to not eat the last donut.

**Brad:** Speaking of which, we should get 'em while they're hot.

*They both go up to the counter and take an inordinate amount of time selecting a few donuts, which they bring back to the table.*

**Paul:** Look, Johanna and Kara were our girlfriends, and things didn't end well for either of them. It's normal for them to act like victims, but the truth is that Brad and I outgrew them.

**Patrick:** *You know I can't believe that you never harmed Johanna in any way.*

**Paul:** I broke her heart; that's it. Okay, maybe once or twice things got out of hand . . .

**Patrick:** *Then how did she get the bruises on her arms and face?*

**Paul:** You should have put in your book that she was clumsy. In high school, her senior trip was to the cafeteria floor.

**Patrick:** *At least two other girls had similar experiences with you.*

**Paul:** Well, like Springsteen says, we're all just dancing in the dark.  
**Patrick:** *Let's talk about that. You listen to Bruce Springsteen because he was your father's favorite artist, right?*

**Paul:** See, that's another thing. All of that stuff about me in the Atlas mini-storage drinking Stroh's beer and writing letters to my dead father. What gives you the right to invade my privacy like that?

**Patrick:** *You're forgetting the most important fact of all—this is fiction. I made stuff up.*

**Paul:** That's our point, you—

**Patrick:** *Yes, it's based on people I knew growing up in Flint, but I invented each of you. In each successive draft, the story turned more from memory to fiction.*

**Brad:** So, why isn't the novel set in your real hometown of Flint, instead of Pontiac? Do you have something to hide?

**Patrick:** *That was on the advice of counsel. You're pre-law, Brad, you should get it.*

**Paul:** Next time you should tell the truth about me.

**Patrick:** *I told a truth; each reader brings to a book his own truth*

*based on his own experiences. Lots of librarians who read it have said, sadly, that they relate all too well to Johanna. Not so much being in an abusive relationship, but being in an unhealthy or obsessive one.*

**Paul:** I wouldn't know about that; the girl I'm dating now is great. Cindy's still in high school, and kind of silly sometimes.

**Patrick:** *Can I meet her?*

**Brad:** Cindy? What happened to Sarah, the girl you took to Johanna's open house?

**Paul:** There have been a few since Sarah. I'm the one with the scorecard now.

**Patrick:** *And why did those relationships end, Paul?*

**Paul:** None of your business.

**Patrick:** *We know that's not true. We both know you, Paul.*

**Paul:** It's not like that. I'm not like that anymore. As you say, things change.

**Patrick:** *And some things don't.*

## The Things Change Book of Lists

Patrick Jones has written almost twenty articles for **VOYA** since 1987. In 1987, he also wrote the first draft of a novel called **Things Change**, which was published in April 2004 by Walker & Company (see **VOYA** review on page 131). Among the many different types of articles that Patrick has written for **VOYA**, readers seem to enjoy his various lists the most. In that spirit, here is **The Things Change Book of Lists**.

### Chronology of Things Change

**1987:** I write the first draft in one long caffeinated weekend, typing the whole thing on my old Sears electric typewriter on the back of legal size flyers for a recently completed program at the Springfield City Library in Massachusetts where I work.

**1988:** When I get it on computer, one chapter is so big that it takes up two Apple IIe disks. Hmm, things change.

**1990:** I submit the manuscript to the Delacorte Press Prize for Best First YA Novel Contest. It doesn't win, but isn't rejected right away—a pretty good sign.

**1991:** A revised version goes to the next Delacorte contest; it gets returned within a week. A very bad sign.

**1992:** Famous YA novelist Chris Crutcher introduces me to an editor, who asks if I have considered writing YA fiction. I say, "Funny you should mention that." She takes the manuscript, but tells me that although I have a good story, I don't know how to tell it. She is right, of course, not that I believe her at the time.

**1992–1999:** I publish a whole bunch of professional stuff and go on the road giving workshops to promote young adult services. I'm a little busy with this undertaking, as well as a nine-to-five job. I show the novel to a few people, but do little work on it.

**2000:** I hear Christopher Paul Curtis speak at the Newbery banquet about taking a year off work to dedicate to writing. I'm sitting with folks from Walker & Company, whom I have known since I served on YALSA's Reluctant Readers Committee in the early 1990s. A year earlier, Emily Easton, the editor and publisher for Walker's Books for Young Readers, had asked me if I ever thought about writing a YA novel. All signs point to getting serious about getting the manuscript to Emily, or to giving up on getting it published.

**2001:** With several YA librarian pals, we start NO\_YAWN: the "Newly Organized Young Adult Writers' Network," an online support group providing me with the structure I need. I have also moved to Minneapolis, taking a year off from a nine-to-five job, although I'm traveling more than ever. I complete the first revised version of **Things Change** in a hotel room in Maine and mail it to Emily a week later from Ohio. Emily and I meet at ALA; she's encouraging, but realistic. She likes the story, the characters, and the theme, but there's a lot of work to do. A *lot* to do.

**2002:** Back to a full-time job, I find time to work on **Things Change**. Every new draft is almost like a new book; each one is skinnier as the subplots and unnecessary pages fall away like ugly pounds.

**2003:** I do a massive rewrite, swallowing all my objections to Emily's suggestions. I hand Emily a radically revised version in January at ALA Midwinter Meeting. About sixty nerve-wracking days later, I get an e-mail from Emily offering me a contract, as well as the chance to do yet another rewrite.

**2004:** The book is published. You are reading this article, and I hope you are considering reading **Things Change**.

## Books That Inspired Things Change

**But I Love Him: Protecting Your Teen Daughter From Controlling, Abusive Dating Relationships** by Jill Murray (Regan Books/HarperCollins, 2000/**VOYA** February 2001). The back jacket has a checklist of signs of abusive relationships. After I wrote a last draft of the novel, I went down the list. Paul was a perfect match. More validation than inspiration.

**Fear Street** series by R. L. Stine. (Archway/**VOYA** sample review April 1994). I admire Stine's ability to tell a story, use cliffhangers, and get quickly into a scene. Reading his books helped me to use suspense techniques in a realistic story.

**The Silver Kiss** by Annette Curtis Klause (Delacorte, 1990/**VOYA** December 1990).

**Crosses** by Shelley Stoebr (Delacorte, 1991/**VOYA** October 1991).

**Rats Saw God** by Rob Thomas. (Simon & Schuster, 1996/**VOYA** June 1996).

**Chinese Handcuffs** by Chris Crutcher (Greenwillow, 1989/**VOYA** June 1989).

**If Rock and Roll Were a Machine** by Terry Davis (Delacorte, 1992/**VOYA** February 1993).

When I finished each of these YA novels, I recall being blown away and thinking, "Wow! I wish I could write even half as well."

**An unnamed YA novel.** In the spring of 1987 I read a YA book whose title I have blocked out, which was so false that it caused me to hurl the book across the room and think: "Wow! I could do better than this." Not that I thought writing a YA novel was easy. Anything that takes seventeen years is not easy, but I knew I could do something different.

NOT **Dreamland** by Sarah Dessen (Viking, 2000/**VOYA** October 2000) or **Breathing Underwater** by Alex Flinn (HarperCollins, 2001/**VOYA** June 2001). I got to the subject of dating violence before both of these books, but they got to market first, so I have avoided reading them.

## Springsteen Songs in Things Change

**"Adam Raised a Cain,"** an angry song about the sins of the father being passed down to the son, which certainly is the tragedy of Paul's story.

**"Backstreets"** plays in the background of Paul and Johanna's break-up scene. The song is about the loss of innocence, unfaithfulness, and heartbreak.

**Born in the USA** CD: As Johanna assumes more of Paul's identity and loses her own, this is the CD that she listens to. Probably "I'm on Fire" is her favorite song.

**"Born to Run"** is Paul's personal theme song; the images and obsessions of Springsteen are shared by Paul.

**"If I Should Fall Behind"** is not only Paul and Johanna's "song," but its theme rips at Johanna. She loves Paul and wants to be there for him, but knows that she can't stay in an unhealthy relationship.

**"My Hometown,"** written about Freehold, New Jersey, certainly could apply to my hometown of Flint, Michigan. I also like the father/son circular story.

**"Something in the Night":** Paul quotes this song after he breaks up with Johanna. It comes from the **Darkness on the Edge of Town** album with Bruce at his most relentless.

**"Thunder Road":** My book is really a riff on "what if" the male character in "Thunder Road" was like Paul, who used his skills to harm as well as charm.

## Influences: Personal and other

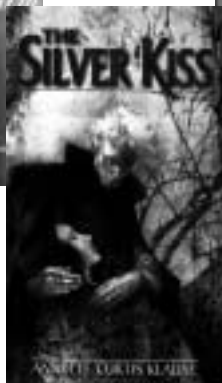
**Annette Curtis Klause, Sara Ryan, and Michael Cart:**

All librarians first, novelists second (only in terms of chronology), these folks really showed me the way.

**Patricia Taylor:** A friend from Houston. For about six months, we got together every week to work on fiction. Our meetings gave me focus and support; her novel is yet to be published (it's not YA), which is a shame because it's really good.

**The editor, Emily Easton:** So this is what editors do. I can't imagine any other person who would have had the patience and perseverance to teach another person to write fiction (although I never did learn how to punctuate dialogue correctly) by asking the right questions repeatedly. Thanks, EE.

**The boss, Bruce Springsteen:** (See next list.) The coolest thing was that to get permission to use his songs, I had to write a check out to Bruce Springsteen.



## Differences Between Writing YA Fiction and Writing About YA Fiction

**The time:** I didn't work on **Things Change** seriously for seventeen years, but fiction is so much harder than other types of writing because it's not about sharing expertise, but about relating an emotional experience. No professional book ever took me more than a year to write, while **Things Change** must be some sort of fiction endurance record—the book is as old as its teen characters.

**The role of the editor:** Editors at professional publishers and magazines like **VOYA** want you to write well, but they care most about content, ideas, and expertise. They will rewrite, reorganize, and edit for you—and that works. Fiction editors make you do the work by asking questions, more questions, and then a few hundred more questions: Why did the character say this? Do you really need this?

**Confidence:** Every time I completed a version and sent it to Emily, I would say to myself, "That's it. I can't make it any better." Then I'd pick myself up off the floor when the manuscript was returned, filled with pencil marks, and I'd realize it could be better.



Patrick Jones is a frequent **VOYA** contributor and author of the young adult novel, **Things Change** (Walker & Company, 2004/**VOYA** June 2004). Ken Rasak is the editor of *Punchlines*, a weekly humor column in *Newsday*.

## What I'm Working on Now/Next

**Connecting Young Adults and Libraries, 3rd Edition** with Michele Gorman and Tricia Suellentrop. Michele is the author of **Getting Graphic: Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens** (Linworth, 2003/**VOYA** June 2004, page 162), and YA librarian at Austin Public Library in Texas. Tricia is a YA librarian at Johnson County Public Library in suburban Kansas City, Kansas. The new edition is forthcoming for Fall 2004 from Neal-Schuman. And yes, the cover will still be pink.

**Nail.** This new novel hopefully won't take seventeen years to get published. Although I wrote the first chapter in April 2000, it wasn't until January 2004 that I got serious. I decided to start almost all over, changing the plot, key scenes, and characters, keeping mainly just the protagonist (Bret Hendricks) and the title. I wrote new and borrowed from the old to hammer out a first full-length draft of **Nail** in two weeks. A few YA librarians and teens are reading this 65,000-word/195-page novel around the theme "the nail that sticks out gets hammered."

## My Favorite Articles Penned for VOYA (in chronological order)

- **Face the Music: The Fiction Scene For Young Adults** (**VOYA** December 1987). Not that it was any great shakes—it's just a simple bibliography, but we all have to start somewhere.
- **Getting Serious About Comics** (**VOYA** April 1988). This extended review of five graphic novels might have been the first look at graphic novels for teens in library professional literature.
- **YA Clicks #1: Web Sites of Interest to Young Adults and Young Adult Librarians** (**VOYA** June 1997). **VOYA**'s first article about Web sites inaugurated the *YA Clicks* column, carried onward by Kellie Shoemaker (now Gillespie) and currently Rebecca Purdy.
- **Retro Mock Printz: The Best of the Best of the Best of Young Adult Literature from the VOYA Years** (**VOYA** December 2002), co-authored with Sarah Cornish. Surveying fellow "experts" about titles published from 1978–1999 that should have won the Michael L. Printz Award, the new literary excellence award from the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), had it existed before 2000, was a lot of fun, producing a list of the best books that YA lit has to offer. I went back to read (or reread) most of the winners, trying to figure out what made these novels so great, so I could make **Things Change** better.
- **Born to Write** (**VOYA** June 2004). You always like your latest work best. My latest, but not last article for **VOYA**.