

researching

reality



PHOTO CREDIT: J. A. Cabrera

HOW A YOUNG
ADULT NOVELIST
RESEARCHES

alex flinn

did you ever read a book about a subject that you know well, and the writer got it all wrong? If you're anything like me, that pretty much kills it. Even if the book is otherwise well-written, I won't enjoy it. The writer has lost credibility with me.

As a former lawyer who now writes young adult fiction, this loss of credibility occurs fairly often when I read; the dramatic witness-stand confessions that are the food of "legal thrillers" seldom happen in real life. My books deal with teens embroiled in the legal system, and I am familiar with many of the issues. Still I have to do a great deal of research.

People usually think of research in connection with nonfiction or historical fiction. A book such as **A Single Shard** (Clarion, 2001/**VOYA** April 2002) would go nowhere if the author hadn't had a thorough knowledge of twelfth-century Korea and the process of making Celadon pottery. Clearly Linda Sue Park did a lot of research to make her book come alive. Research is just as important in writing realistic contemporary fiction. After all, these are people's lives with which I am dealing, things that are actually happening to my readers and people they know. These actual situations create a sense of responsibility toward my readers. I also want my books to feel as real as possible. Many teenagers write to ask me whether my characters actually exist, whether the events occurred. To create this kind of reality, research must be impeccable.

Which comes first—story or research? Does a writer research to find a story or write the story and use research to fill in the gaps? The answer is yes. Sometimes a story springs full-blown into a writer's head, and the writer must research in order to fact-check the story once it is written. Often a story springs from something the writer already knows. But other times, the writer's research leads her to new places.

using a well-known subject

My first novel, **Breathing Underwater**, was inspired by subject matter well-known to me: domestic and dating violence. **Breathing Underwater** is about a boy whose girlfriend has taken out a restraining order against him because of his abusive behavior. He must attend a family violence class to learn to deal with anger.

I have tried domestic violence cases and also volunteered for several years at a transitional living center for battered women and their children. Through this work, I became very familiar with the cycle of violence: A child (usually a boy) is abused at home or sees his mother abused. Boys who grow up in



abusive homes are more likely to carry out abuse against loved ones in the future. It is the only way that some of them know to deal with the helplessness, anger, and shame within them.

I also became very familiar with the cycle that occurs within each relationship. A violent man will meet a woman and paint an idealized mental picture of her. When she fails to meet this impossible standard, he will become controlling, will isolate her from friends and family, and gradually will grow more and more violent. Following each act of violence, there is a period of contrition, when the abuser promises not to do it again—and complies at least long enough to get her back. But soon the anger will boil up. With each succeeding cycle, the peaceful period becomes shorter and shorter, and the bad period becomes more violent.

In **Breathing Underwater**, I wrote about this cycle, the controlling behavior and violence followed by apology, because I hoped that my teen readers would see the pattern and recognize that it *was* a pattern, in the event that it happened to them.

experience probably isn't enough

Even when I have some experience in a subject, I still need to do research. Although I knew quite a bit about violent relationships, I knew little about the counseling programs for abusers. My research consisted of calling people who worked with abusers to get their experiences, and reading numerous books on the subject. I also spoke with abuse survivors about their experiences.

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Typically when I begin to research a novel, I call someone I know who has expertise on the subject. Then a chain reaction occurs when that person connects me to another and then another. With **Breathing Underwater**, I contacted a friend who worked in the civil domestic violence court (I had done only criminal, but my characters would not be in criminal court), where restraining orders are granted against abusers. I had her walk me through the procedure for getting a restraining order. She assured me that she saw many teenagers who were involved in violent relationships. Then I asked, “Do you know anyone who works with counseling programs for abusers?” I contacted the person she recommended, who told me about all the counseling available. Then I asked, “Can I talk to someone who actually works with the abusers?” and asked that person questions. In this way, I expand my circle of research beyond the easily accessible.

research sometimes inspires story

My second book, **Breaking Point**, was inspired by research as well as some of my own experiences in high school. The initial inspiration was a small article which mentioned the ease of finding instructions on the Internet to build a bomb—and how these sites were directed at teens. At the time (1998), I had just gotten online and was fascinated by this new technology and its sinister possibilities. One of my very first Internet searches was an attempt to see how easy it really was. I searched the following terms: *bomb build anarchy school*.



The vast majority of my tens of thousands of hits were specifically directed toward teenagers who were interested in planting a bomb at school (although most of the sites disclaimed, as did the one in my book, that they were “for educational purposes only”). Many included detailed instructions and calls to action.

This search occurred pre-Columbine, and I was intensely curious about what would make someone decide to do such a desperate act. Most sites seemed geared toward getting revenge on students who had mistreated the Web site visitor. I had strong memories of cruelties perpetrated upon students at schools I had attended. I was familiar with the inner workings of a teenager who didn't fit in because I had spent my own teen years doing just that. But what made today's teens different? What would make them violent? My research on the small number of minor school violence incidents that had occurred at that time revealed that boys often acted in twos, with one possibly inspired by the other. So I decided to write a book about two boys who planted a bomb—one leader, one follower. In this case, research inspired the story.

Unfortunately research for **Breaking Point** became stunningly easy in the years that followed, as more and more school violence incidents occurred. My initial research and my imagination, however, provided a great deal of the fodder for the book. The Web site in the book is based on actual sites I saw in that first fateful Internet search.

learning new facts

Researching **Breaking Point** was frightening, but researching **Nothing to Lose** was fascinating. My third novel—about a teenager who runs away from a violent home to join the carnival and then returns to find his mother on trial for murdering her abusive husband—allowed me to use my legal expertise and experience with battered women. But I also learned many things that I had never dealt with before, such as backstage carnies secrets and crime scene investigation (CSI) techniques.



I started writing **Nothing to Lose** because I am a carnival aficionado. Soon I would know more about carnivals than I ever dreamed possible. Because our carnival comes to town in March and I started writing my book in the fall, I began my research through books and online, finding Web sites devoted to carnies slang and tales of former carnies. An out-of-print title, **Carnival** by Arthur Lewis, who traveled with the carnival and reported his experience, provided a framework for my book, which was filled in with more recent research, including newspaper articles and carnival visits. Newspapers let me know how much a carnies pays per week for a bed in a trailer (twenty dollars), how many carnies live in the trailer (twelve), and where carnies send their kids to school (there is a private carnies school).

Visiting the carnival provided the color for the book. I spent several hours standing by the Whack-a-Mole game, writing down the things that carnies say to entice marks (patrons) to play (“We’re looking for terminators, Whack-a-Mole exterminators!”). I went to the carnival’s circus and took notes, finding details to give richness to my description. I talked to carnies about their lives and their families—to the degree that they would let me. My most interesting observation was one that I had never noticed in close to twenty years attending the carnival. In my town, our carnival is shaped like a donut, with rides all around and carny lodgings (trailers) in the center. I had never realized that if one goes up on any overhead ride—the Ferris Wheel, Doppel Looping, or Skyride—the town that houses all the carnival workers is clearly visible from above. It’s fascinating how we see only what we care to notice.

mining familiar territory

I was also able to use my legal experience in telling the story of Michael and his mother in **Nothing to Lose**. I spoke with an assistant state attorney who had seen many such cases in her years with the office, and I made several trips to the law library to research the battered spouse syndrome defense and its use in Florida. I also remembered my experiences with the domestic violence court, particularly the frustration that I felt when a woman failed to testify against her abuser. How much greater must that frustration be for family members like my main character, Michael, who must watch it day in and day out? What must they go through? I spoke with friends who had grown up in homes where their mothers were abused. Many of their stories were heartbreaking.

dumb luck—or open eyes?

One of the most important parts of research is simply keeping one’s eyes open. Sometimes in writing a book, an author comes across just the information she needs, entirely by accident. It seems like fate or dumb luck.

Such was the case in researching **Nothing to Lose**. I have a bad habit of leaving the television on while I’m up late writing. On one particular night, I stayed up until almost 1:00 a.m. When I got up to go to bed, the television was on in the living room. A woman was saying, “This is the only way it was going to end. The only way was if I ended it.”

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She was describing a killing almost exactly like the one that occurs in **Nothing to Lose**: A blunt object was used to kill an abuser. Rapt with attention, I watched as she described holding up the object in case the man rose, and the mixture of fear and relief that she felt when she saw him dead. A lot of her feelings were the same ones that I had described for my character. As a writer, one often relies on instinct—one imagines how one would feel in that situation. It is very satisfying to have those instincts confirmed.

My very best piece of fortuitous research was at LaGuardia Airport.

An important element of **Nothing to Lose** deals with blood spatter evidence. Through blood spatter, police can tell what kind of weapon was used and where the participants were standing. In **Nothing to Lose**, Michael’s mother says she was acting in self-

defense. The state alleges that she sneaked up on her husband and killed him. I needed to know how the blood spatter would look in either case.

I didn’t know any blood spatter experts. I perused the bookstore. The books were helpful enough to allow me to write my draft. But I knew I’d have to talk to a real crime scene investigator at some point. I put off making the dreaded cold call.

On a trip to New York, I was waiting for my luggage at LaGuardia Airport. It was taking a long time, and I happened to look over to my left to see two men wearing jackets that said “NYPD Crime Scene Investigation.”

“Finally I went over to them and said, ‘I’m writing a novel, and I was wondering—if someone bludgeoned someone with a fireplace poker, what would the blood spatter look like?’”

The longer I waited for my luggage, the braver I got. Finally I went over to them and said, “I’m writing a novel, and I was wondering—if someone bludgeoned someone with a fireplace poker, what would the blood spatter look like?”

“What kind of book is this?” one officer asked.

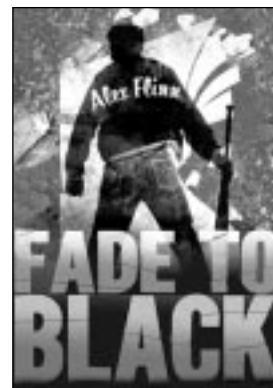
A crowd gathered. I described the killing in my novel and asked about what the police would see.

I found out that I was pretty much right. The person who did it wouldn’t have a lot of blood on his or her body—and blood spatter is not as exact a science as the *CSI* television show would have you believe. Police can get a general idea of what happened, but often it is open to two or three interpretations. That’s where you get reasonable doubt. Again I was hearing exactly what I wanted to hear. And I was able to put the words “inexact science” into my book to explain to my readers how life really *isn’t* like *CSI*.

In doing all that research, I hoped to open up a new world for my readers—not only Michael’s world of the carnival and his life before, but a glimpse into the worlds of the attorneys who worked on the case and the police who investigated it. Michael’s attorney is an important character in the book, so maybe a future law student would enjoy it, or a teacher could use it in a pre-legal class to discuss the issues. No one is going to be able to try a murder case based upon my book. But I hope my legal background and knowledge of issues that would occur in such a case creates realism for my readers.

talking to strangers

Sometimes I simply know no one and have to call strangers. For a person who counts herself shy, such calls are a vaguely terrifying but natural hazard of writing realistic fiction. In researching my forthcoming novel, **Fade to Black**, I had to reach outside my circle for information about HIV. The novel deals with a hate crime against an HIV-positive student and is narrated by the victim, the accused perpetrator, and a witness, a girl with Down Syndrome. Years before, some friends had died of AIDS, but I had never studied it and knew little about hate crimes other than what I



read in the newspaper. Of course, I felt duty-bound to write the most accurate possible novel about this serious subject.

Internet research is very useful in this situation, and I found names of numerous AIDS organizations in my area. Yet I received no answers to my e-mails. It was time to call.

After calls to several organizations, which ranged from merely unhelpful (citing “patient confidentiality” even though I never asked for specific case files) to downright rude (“We don’t deal with teenagers!”), I finally met Stacie Murray of AIDS Project Florida, who seemed thrilled that I was writing a book for teens. Stacie was not only willing to speak with me, but directed her entire staff of counselors to sit down with me and go over all the specifics of my novel, confirming that what I was writing indeed could happen. They made suggestions and shared experiences while keeping names and specifics confidential. In one scene in **Fade to Black**, my main character is wearing an AIDS Project Florida T-shirt in honor of the group’s efforts.

statistical research

Usually researching a novel is more than merely finding statistical facts. Yet sometimes statistics can show a writer the relevance of her work or prove a point.

Such was the case in my research for **Fade to Black**. I knew that hate crimes occurred, but it seemed as if they shouldn’t in our enlightened times. Only a real nutcase would be afraid of catching HIV from a random classmate, I thought. One of my viewpoint characters was accused of the crime and had participated in such activities as leaving threatening notes in the victim’s locker. I needed to understand the mindset of a person who would do such a thing.

Therefore I was very interested to find a study done in 2003 by the Minnesota AIDS Project, in which researchers found that 43 percent of those surveyed did not know or were uncertain about whether HIV could be transmitted through a cough or a sneeze, and 38 percent did not know or were uncertain whether it could be transmitted from a toilet seat. The study also noted that those in rural areas were less likely to know the facts than those living in cities. I was shocked that such ignorance still abounded. Thus it seems highly possible that some students still believe that HIV can be spread by casual contact and that some students would avoid or even ostracize an HIV sufferer. My further research, which involved speaking to AIDS counselors and mentioning my book to every teacher I know, confirmed that students do express unwillingness to sit beside HIV-positive students.

running it all by an expert

Perhaps the most difficult part of researching a novel is showing it to someone who is familiar with the subject, to get his or her approval. Sometimes a writer simply describes all the facts and asks if the scenario is possible. At other times, it is necessary to find someone to read the book.

I needed a reader for **Fade to Black**, to examine my character who has Down Syndrome. I had written her sections in verse, based upon the thought and speech patterns that I had observed in individuals with Down Syndrome. But would people who were close to kids with DS think it was realistic? Was the poetry silly? I had an extremely picky friend upon whose daughter the character of Daria was largely based. I decided to ask Pat to read the manuscript.

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The days while Pat had the book were scary for me. She didn’t read it immediately, so like any writer, I freaked. Obviously she must be insulted by my portrayal and would never speak to me again—and my book stunk. She finally returned it with nothing but praise, asking if she could show it to other people. I felt much better about the manuscript. To validate my HIV-positive character, I ran each detail of the symptoms by the AIDS counselors before turning in the final manuscript. It was very important to me that my portrayal be faithful, that I not give any wrong ideas. I think that this duty is especially strong when dealing with teen fiction, which is often the reader’s first introduction to a subject.

conclusion

“Write what you know” is a common maxim among writers. To a certain degree, I have done that by using both my legal background and my own experiences in school as fodder for my books. But if writers only wrote what they knew, there would be no historical fiction—and books in which a viewpoint character commits a murder would have to be written by felons.

So the logical corollary of “write what you know” is “research what you don’t know.” By doing so, I hope to open up a new world to my readers . . . and to myself.

books by alex flinn

Breathing Underwater. HarperCollins, 2001. 224p. \$15.99. 0-06-029198-2. PLB \$16.89. 0-06-029199-0. \$7.99 Trade pb. 0-06-447257-4. **VOYA** June 2001.

Breaking Point. HarperCollins, 2002. 224p. \$15.95. 0-06-623847-1. PLB \$16.89. 0-06-623848-X. \$6.99 Trade pb. 0-06-447371-6. **VOYA** June 2002.

Nothing to Lose. HarperCollins, 2004. 288p. \$15.99. 0-06-051750-6. PLB \$16.89. 0-06-051751-4. **VOYA** June 2004.

Fade to Black. HarperCollins, forthcoming April 2005.



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