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Q & A with Lisa Fipps

By Patricia J. Murphy | May 23, 2022

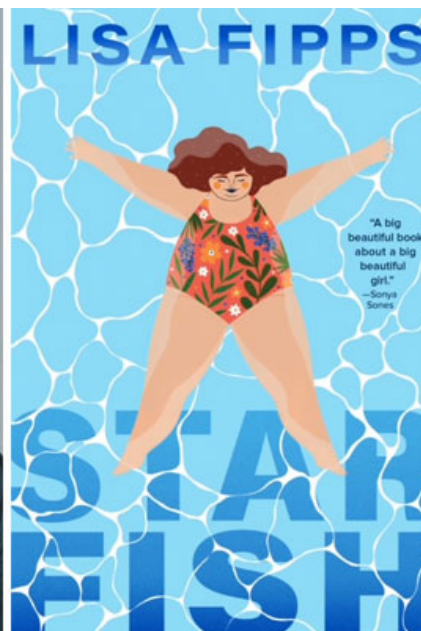
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*Lisa Fipps is the author of the middle grade novel **Starfish**, a 2022 Printz Honor book that Sonya Sones called "a big beautiful book about a big beautiful girl." Fipps is also a former journalist and currently director of marketing at the Kokomo-Howard County Public Library in Kokomo, Ind. PW spoke with Fipps about*

*how her multiple roles intersect and inform each other, why **Starfish** is the book she had to write, and what her hopes are for her readers who come in all different shapes and sizes.*

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How did you first become a writer? Is it true it had to do with a boy, a poem, and a creative writing class?

Doesn't it always start with a boy? But, before that, I was the youngest person in my family and in my neighborhood, and lived in a rural area where I didn't have a lot of playmate. Oftentimes, I would sit under a tree in my backyard and write, draw, and listen to music. And, I was a total arts girl—I took private art lessons, and was in advanced art classes at school. But in my sophomore year, I did not like my art teacher, and some of my friends were taking a creative writing class. So I decided to join them. I had never really shared my writing outside of essays that I had to write in school. So, I took this creative writing class. And, then in walked #40—that's what I called him. He was #40 on the basketball team!

Our teacher gave us an assignment to write a poem for a contest. I wrote my poem, and it won something. I don't remember what. When we read the poems out loud to the class, #40 looked at me for the very first time. Sure, we had all

kinds of classes with each other, and did marching band competitions together; but he'd never really *seen* me before. When he heard my poem, he looked up at me with his blue eyes and he asked me, "You wrote this?" And, of course, I was nonverbal because I was totally crushing on him, and I was just shaking my head "yes." And, he said, "This is good! Could I have a copy of this?" This is how it all started—someone seeing me right through my writing. But what was so funny to me was the poem was about him. He just saw that it was a love poem. I gave it to him, and he was appreciative. But he never knew it was about him. And it was then that I thought, "I'll be a writer."

How did this thought turn to action?

It wasn't long after that my teachers were sharing my poem around school, when my guidance counselor called me into her office and tried to encourage me to go into writing. I told her that I might like to write books one day. She suggested that I should keep writing, and the best way would be through journalism. So I went to Ball State University and majored in journalism, and after I graduated I became a journalist.

On your path to becoming a journalist, what did you learn that helped you become the writer you are today?

I did everything in the newsroom. I started out as a writer, became an editor, and then a managing editor for both newspapers and magazines in Texas and in Indiana. I learned the art of telling a story. I also really honed my skills in creating characters because I met so many characters along the way. Over 19 years, I wrote over 6,000 articles on everything from presidential trips to square dancing llamas. My focus was the police beat, education, government, health, and science.

When did you switch your focus to library marketing? What are your main responsibilities as library marketing director?

At one point, I felt that I'd done enough in journalism and it was time to move on. I thought a lot about what my ideal job would be with my skill set of storytelling, writing, photography, and design. And then I found an opening for a part-time director of marketing at a library. I loved the idea of promoting books, authors, reading, and library services to the community. I write press releases and talk to the media all the time. I also create the scripts for little commercials that we do, and all of the text for the newsletter that goes out to 45,000 homes every quarter. I've been doing this for 11 years.

What's the best part of working in the library today?

The best part is when I am walking into work or leaving for the day and I see children running into the library because they cannot wait to get a book. It is the best feeling in the world! I also get to hear them talk about how they have this book or can't wait to see what happens in the next book. It just warms my heart, and makes me believe even more in the power of books, reading, and writing.

What's the biggest challenge?

Since Covid, everyone is used to having everything virtual, and now they want to be able to attend a program, and have virtual options, too. This makes for a big challenge for libraries. And, then of course, book banning has always been—and continues to be—a challenge. It's always in the back of our minds that we are going to get challenged on something that's on our shelves. So we have made sure that we have a really good policy in place that explains our collection management policies.

These policies help patrons understand that while a book may offend them, our job is to provide a variety of books for an entire community. It's like a buffet. You can read what you want and you ignore what you don't. And that's just what a library has always been. It's a variety of materials, and you choose what you want to read. Today, it's almost as if people feel like you're trying to put something on their plates. We're not trying to put anything on your plates. We're trying to make sure it's available for everyone.

In what ways have your roles as journalist, library marketing director, and children's author intersected and informed each other?

Again, journalism gave me a ton of tools for storytelling: conflict, plot, mannerisms, character, and dialogue. My marketing background—especially working at a library—has helped me to see the value of story, and to put that value into words. And now, as a children's book author, I get to actually write stories that I've been thinking about.

In 2018, you sold your debut novel in verse, *Starfish*, which came out in March 2021 to critical acclaim. Where did this story come from?

I lived it. It's my story. When I was a kid, I was always reading and always looking for a book about a girl like me, and I never ever saw myself in a book. Because of this, I felt unseen, unheard, unnoticed, and definitely different than others. And, as I sat under that tree as a kid, I had a lot of stories that I wanted to tell. But, as I got older, I started thinking about what I wanted to be my *first* story. I asked myself, "If I could only get one book published in my life, what was it going to be?" And it was, it had to be, *Starfish*. So that's when I started thinking about how to tell this story. I began getting what I call

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I don't want readers to just walk in a character's shoes, because you can

“movie trailers” in my head of Ellie, and all the other characters in *Starfish*, and little snippets of dialogue. This is how I was able to tell Ellie’s story using my experiences and emotions.

Did you always know it would be a novel in verse? How did you choose to write in poetry vs. prose?

The story came out on paper as one poem, and then another poem, and another. Initially, I thought that I couldn’t write a book in a series of free-verse poems. Then I went to a bookstore and discovered Sonya Sones’s novel in verse, *Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy*. I read the very first pages and realized that I could write my story this way. Every time I’d tried to turn a poem into prose, it was like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. So discovering Sonia’s book gave me the freedom I needed to write *Starfish*.

take off shoes easily if they get uncomfortable. I want readers to live in a character’s skin.

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Where did the courage come from to write this highly personal and emotional story?

I don’t know that I ever had the courage to write it, but “Little Lisa” (my younger self) had the courage to write it. My life wasn’t easy. In addition to the issues I address in *Starfish*, there are other things that made my life difficult, and they’ll probably come out in other books. I have never met anyone in my life as strong as little Lisa. And I think that if she could be brave enough to live it, I needed to be brave enough to tell it because there are children out there living it. It happens every day to kids just like her. And my readers need to know that they are more than enough.

What is your hope for this book?

My hope for *Starfish* is to hit the heart. My goal was to be truly authentic about what it is like to be fat. And so if you’re fat, you hear it, you feel seen and heard. And if you’re not fat, you get to be inside Ellie’s skin for a while and see what it’s like. I don’t want readers to just walk in a character’s shoes, because you can take off shoes easily if they get uncomfortable. I want readers to live in a character’s skin: feel what they feel, experience life and the world the way they do.

Do you have advice for librarians and teachers on how to tell their own stories?

First of all, don’t leave anything on the plate. Don’t hold back. Give it 100%. Because if you don’t, the reader will know you didn’t give it your all. The other thing is when you are typing your story on your computer, tell your truth, throw it all out there, and don’t worry that just because it’s on the screen that someone is going to read it right away. No one will read it until you get it out—you finish writing, editing, and, decide to share it. But, first, focus on getting it out of you—and once you do, you’ll be comfortable with it. Getting it out to readers is not uncomfortable. You think it will be, but it’s not. The hard part is getting it out of you.

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