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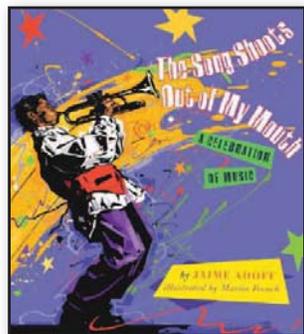
Jaime Adoff and the Creative Process

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

► TERESA YOUNG AND DARWIN HENDERSON

A native New Yorker raised in Yellow Springs, Ohio, Jaime Adoff is both a musician and a writer. After completing a Bachelor of Music degree from Central State University, Adoff moved back to New York City where he studied drums and voice at the Manhattan School of Music. He pursued a career as a songwriter and started his own rock band, but he began writing again when the music path was leading nowhere.

Adoff's first book, **The Song Shoots Out of My Mouth: A Celebration of Music** was a Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award Honor book, an IRA Notable Book for the Teen Age, a VOYA Pure Poetry Pick, and a Center for Children's Books (CCB) Best Book. His first novel for young



adults, **Names Will Never Hurt Me**, was critically acclaimed and nominated for YALSA's Best Books for Young Adults. Adoff's second novel, **Jimi and Me**, was the recipient of the 2006 Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe New Talent Author Award.

Adoff's latest novel, **The Death of Jayson Porter**, has received starred reviews. In this e-mail interview, Adoff discusses his creative writing process, those who have influenced him, and the sources of his inspiration.

TY and DH: *When did you know you wanted to be a writer and how did you become one?*

JA: I began to write as a way to make myself feel better while going through a hard time. I had been in pursuit of a record deal with my band for close to ten years, and it was apparent that it just wasn't going to happen. So I started writing like I had done when I was a teenager. Back then, I wrote songs to release my emotions and help me get through the ups and downs of teenage-dom. So when the rock-n-roll star thing didn't work out, I began to write again, this time without the music. Just the poetry. And, boy,

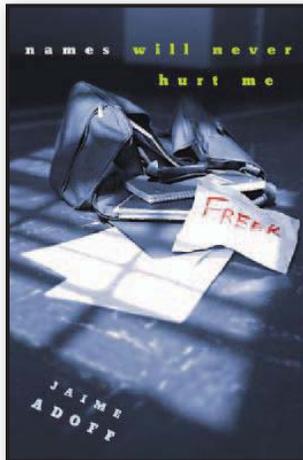
did I have a lot to say. During this same time, two things happened that I couldn't ignore. One was the sheer volume of poems, short stories, novel sketches, etc. that I was amassing, and the second was how incredibly awesome I felt while producing these early works. It was at this time that I really felt I was onto something and that it was just the beginning. From my teens into my twenties, I really had been writing poetry—but with music. Later, when I started writing professionally, I already felt comfortable with words and how to express myself. It was not that much of a stretch from songwriting to writing poetry. And from writing poetry to writing poetic novels was, I feel, a natural progression. Starting small and then expanding. Just seeing one piece at a time, working on it, giving it a title, and then going on to the next.

Writing a poetic novel is very freeing; I love how I can make a piece more prose-like if I wish or more poetic, depending on what is best for the book at that particular time. Ultimately, for me, this style of writing gives the story immediacy and a raw emotional impact that sometimes is lacking in a more traditional young adult novel. More important, the poetic novel is all-inclusive in its readership, bringing together the facile reader with the reluctant and the “I never even finished a book before” reader. It is truly a win-win for both author and teen alike.

TY and DH: *How did the music of language and the language of music influence you?*

JA: Music and words were all around me growing up. My father always had on the radio or the stereo. I was fortunate to grow up with some of the best music from all genres as the soundtrack to my childhood. Being that my father was good friends with and used to manage the legendary bass player and composer Charles Mingus, jazz figured prominently in that soundtrack. Personally I think I connected the most with the rock and folk music of the 60s and 70s, with artists such as Joni Mitchell, Crosby Stills and Nash, Sly and the Family Stone, The Beatles, Janis Joplin. Then I discovered Led Zeppelin and that was it for me. From that point on, rock-n-roll was my passion and my mission.

I can remember vividly how I felt while listening to this music. It took me places in my imagination, exotic and magical places, and I believe, greatly fostered my creativity. It was the same feeling I got when my parents would read to me. When I was quite small I would curl up on my mother's lap and she would usually read from one of her books—my favorite being **Time Ago Tales of Jahdu**. My mother was such a master storyteller and the story itself was so powerful and engaging, I literally would forget that my mother was reading me the story. She would become Mama Luka, who was the narrator in the story. To this day I can see myself both in the story and curled up on Mama Luka's lap. This [image] was extremely powerful, and I count it as one of the greatest memories of my childhood. Looking back on it, it really set the stage for me to be such a lover of reading books, and now as an author, to try to re-create that feeling for other readers. My goal is to create a story that transports the reader directly into the book, unfiltered and unencumbered from the weight of our everyday “reality.”



TY and DH: *Who has influenced your writing style?*

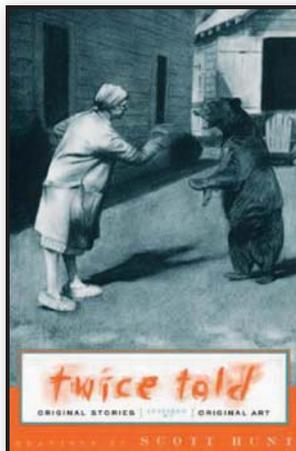
JA: Mostly my parents, Arnold Adoff and the late Virginia Hamilton. It is very interesting to me that my father is a poet, my mother was a novelist, and my first three novels were written in a poetic-prose style.

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TY and DH: *How much did your parent's writing careers shape what you are doing now?*

JA: I believe that seeing my parents work everyday—seeing the creative process from my earliest memory—had a gigantic effect on what I'm doing now. I grew up in a household where creating something out of thin air was just what you did. It was nothing out of the ordinary; it was a job. So I really didn't have any of the fear or self-censorship that many people have when they start to create. I was being fed some of the greatest lessons an artist could get on a daily basis just by watching: seeing my mother go into her office in the morning with a cup of coffee and then come out hours later with pages and pages of writing. I really thought, as a small child, that if you poured coffee on blank pages, words would appear. What magic, how incredible that was to witness as a child. Of course as I grew up, I found out that there is some magic involved, but mostly it is a lot of hard work, sweat, and hopefully not too much blood!

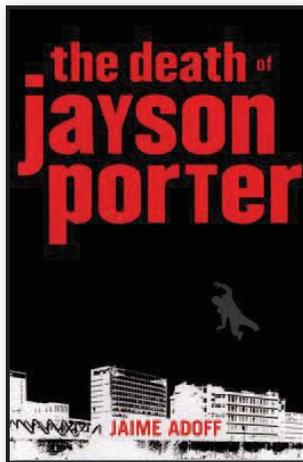
Playing upstairs in my father's office while he worked also had a profound effect on me. I heard him read his poetry out loud—poetry that was pasted on every conceivable nook and cranny of space on his walls. I would play with my train set



in my fantasy world while he worked, creating his poetry, reading the poems into the air. Unknowingly I pretty much got everything I would ever need to be a poet right there in that office: rhythm, rhyme, structure, but most of all enthusiasm and the passion and pure love for words.

TY and DH: *Were there any other writers who influenced your work?*

JA: The works of Robert Cormier had a profound effect on my style and how I tell a story. Cormier really was the first author that I read where things didn't wrap up all nicely with a bow on it at the end of his novels. He dwelled in that gray area, in which we all, for the most part, live. I am fascinated with the fact that human beings are fallible; we are not all good and we are not all bad. We are human, and he showed that in a brilliant way. His endings were very realistic, and they made you want to continue on with the lives of the characters long after the book ended. I have also been very much influenced by a rock singer-poet-spoken word artist named Henry Rollins. He wrote some extremely raw poetry books that literally "bled" onto the page. I think he directly influenced my first person, raw, emotional narratives, which are the core of my novels. He also turned me on to one of the most influential books that I ever read, **Requiem for a Dream** by Hubert Selby Jr., best known for **Last Exit to**



a first-person account of something that I need to know. For instance in the **Death of Jayson Porter**, part of my research called for me to interview a person who had suffered a similar injury to that of Jayson's. To be able to hear someone give me his personal account is just something I can't get any other way. Often times, I don't even use all the research that I've done for a particular project. But it isn't wasted. Just because I don't see a one-to-one relationship to the novel doesn't mean the research hasn't influenced me and the book, or will influence some future book to come. Simply put, the more research I do, the better the book will be.

TY and DH: *Your characters are so developed in their emotional responses. What enables you to so fully understand the feelings of adolescents?*

JA: I wake up every morning, and no matter how I feel, I look in the mirror and I still see that sixteen-year-old kid smiling back at me. I think I will forever be a teen, and that's what keeps me close to the source. I think my teenage years never left me. The emotions, the experiences, they are all, thankfully, still right at my fingertips.

TY and DH: *Can you provide insight into the writing of **The Death of Jayson Porter**?*

JA: The idea and opening poem sat on the desktop of my computer for something like three years. Then after a school visit in Northeast Ohio, I realized it was the story I needed to write. At that high school, I met and listened to teens whose lives would make Jayson's seem tame by comparison. It wasn't just their hardships and tragedies that had such an impact on me; it was that they all still had smiles on their faces. They knew there was a world beyond their neighborhoods and the violence that was commonplace in their lives. They wanted to achieve and do great things with their lives. They didn't let the streets beat them even though they had seen more than any teenager should ever have to see. It was what really stuck with me; it was my inspiration to write Jayson's story—so that all of the many other Jaysons of the world could see themselves in that book, and see that even in the darkest, the bleakest of hours, there is hope. There is always hope.

TY and DH: *How did you continue the process? Can you elaborate?*

JA: The book started with the opening poem:

*I am a bullet
screaming to the ground.
The air rushing past me, so fast I can't breathe.
I am gasping.
The sound—like a 747 taking off in my eardrums.
Getting louder and louder.
The ground getting closer and closer.
This is supposed to get rid of my pain,
Get rid of it forever.
This is my cure.*

There is so much in that opening poem that gave me clues to what the rest of the book would be like—to where the story would go. Then I dove deep into the characters, especially Jayson. Novels are, for the most part, character driven; the deeper you delve into the lives, relationships, past, present, and future—the very

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Brooklyn. Requiem for a Dream was and still is, to this day, one of the most real and raw novels I've ever read. The works of Nikki Giovanni and Angela Johnson as well as the great Kurt Vonnegut, William Faulkner, and many other classic writers and poets have influenced my work.

TY and DH: *How do you select your book topics?*

JA: I will get an idea, but I get many ideas. So the ones that stick with me, the ones that I can't shake, that live with me for some time, their stories begin to speak to me before I write the first word, and those are the ones that get written. Because, well, I just don't have any other choice. It is cliché but it's true. I don't pick my topics, they pick me.

TY and DH: *Describe the research you do for your books.*

JA: I immerse myself in the subject matter of a particular book I am writing. I learned a long time ago from my mother—who was a master researcher—that research is the cornerstone of a good novel. It informs me not only of the facts and figures, etc., but doing good research also enriches the characters and in turn enriches the story I am telling. I will conduct an interview to get

souls of your characters—the more the plot will begin to reveal itself. I had to walk in Jayson’s shoes; I had to breath his air, eat his food. At times it was a tortuous existence for me as the writer. I wanted to help Jayson, but instead I was the one hurting him. I was creating his miserable existence. But I kept telling myself that his story had to be told. I would come out of my office for a break, and my wife’s face would turn completely ashen. She couldn’t believe how I looked. Like I had been living Jayson’s life, going through everything he had gone through. Well, in a sense I had. I felt everything he felt. I had to really get in touch with some very disturbing emotions; I had to go waaaay past my comfort level and then go even further. It was, without a doubt, a grueling and painful experience to write this book. But ultimately it was extremely satisfying.

TY and DH: *Did you know how the story would end during the writing process?*

JA: During the course of writing the many drafts of the book, the ending began to reveal itself to me, but I didn’t know exactly how it would end until the final draft. And interestingly enough, I even made some changes to the book after the advanced reading copies came out. The ARCs have to go out so early that often times the author isn’t done revising the book. I made some last minute changes to the last few pages. Nothing that would change the ending dramatically, but I feel that those last changes smoothed out some rough edges that always bothered me. I’m glad that I was able to include those changes in the final book.

TY and DH: *How do you hope your readers will connect with this story?*

JA: I hope that they will be able to feel what it is like to walk in Jayson’s shoes, whether or not they’ve ever been in a situation like his. My aim is that it will help those who have and create tolerance, understanding, and a place to begin a meaningful dialogue for those who haven’t.

TY and DH: *Can you share a reader’s response to your books? What insights did the readers offer?*

JA: This response is from a high school student who e-mailed me: “Dear Mr. Adoff, . . . The Jayson Porter story really got to me. You see, I have a friend whose life is just like Jayson’s. I never really listened or gave it much thought on how he would feel until I read your book. Your book gave me a different perspective of how life really is for those who live like that. Now I understand my friend’s feelings more. The only difference in my friend’s life is that he gets abused by his dad and unfortunately his mom passed away when he was only five.” Another reader e-mailed me and said, “I was stunned, enthralled, horrified, and amazed.”

One last word about **The Death of Jayson Porter**. There is so much to take and to learn from this book that I think it is best left for readers to see what it is for themselves. I did not intend to make some sort of statement with this book but just to tell a story that I felt very strongly needed to be told. I will say that I believe in the strength and resiliency of teens. That often in our culture, teens are the odd ones out, left out in the creation of the important policy issues of the day. Forgotten when it comes to the effects that ill-conceived public policy and generations of purposeful neglect can have on them.

I think it is also worth mentioning that when all else fails them, teens can get back up from what most of us would think was a sure knockout punch. Jayson’s story is very tough, even brutal at times. But it’s real and it happens, sadly, every day. ■

Jaime Adoff’s creative process:

- **Drink 2-4 cups** of strong coffee early in the morning.
- **Add a large block** of “uninterrupted” time to create.
- **Throw in many hours** of sweat, frustration, and pure joy.
- **Add a pinch of magic**, a gallon of inspiration, a boatload of confidence (real or imagined), and months of writing and re-writing and revising and revising. Did I mention revising? Oh yeah, revising.

PUDDINGS

SOUPS

CREATIVE
SUCCESS

LADS.
ALAD
JRESSINGS

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SAUCES

WORKS BY JAIME ADOFF

The Death of Jayson Porter. Hyperion/DBG, 2008. 272p. \$15.99. 978-1-4231-0691-3. \$7.99 Trade pb. 978-1-4231-0692-0. **VOYA** February 2008. **5Q 4P S**

“The God of St. James and Vine.” **Twice Told: Original Stories Inspired by Original Art.** Illus. by Scott W. Hunt. Dutton, 2006. 259p. \$19.99. 978-0-525-46818-9. Illus.

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[Editor’s Note: Check out The Death of Jayson Porter: A Teaching Guide, a supplement to this article, available online at <http://www.voya.com> on December 1, 2009.]

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