

Readin' & Writin' with Lauraine- November 2008



I am staring at a red book with the title *Jerk* in big white blurry letters, and *California* in very small white lower case letters and wondering how I will do this book justice.

The title certainly fits the book since the main character, an older teen, struggles with Tourette syndrome. This coming of age story grabs you by the throat on the first page and throughout the story, and gives you a shake now and then to keep you riveted.

You ache for the boy and want to take a baseball bat to his stepfather. Not a comfortable book to read, but one that makes compassion part of your immediate needs, both for yourself and those around you. Especially those who are different than you.

All his life, Sam Carrier believed his real father, who died early, didn't love him, nor could anyone else due to his inability to be still. The jerks and twitches drive everyone away or make them jeer. When he graduates from high school, he learns, thanks to an unusual gardener, that things aren't always as they seem, and Sam leaves on a journey to discover both his father and himself. Add in a lovely and needy female friend and various interesting other characters and the story grows even more memorable.

In the Q & A interview in the back of the book, author Jonathan Friesen says that Sam's struggle with Tourette's mirrors his own, but that the story itself is pure fiction. Along with the interview, he has included discussion questions for teachers and reading groups.

While *Jerk California* is listed as a YA book-- meaning older teens--adults and families will enjoy this book too. Which brings me to my lesson on a writing skill to pull out of this. The obvious one, that we've talked about before, is using your own life experiences in your writing, especially in fiction. The hardest part of using what really happened is divorcing yourself from the feeling that you have, to be true to the facts and actions that were there.

Create characters that have no basis on those folks who people your personal history, make them as different as you are able, give them a different setting, time period, wishes and desires. But, like Jonathan did, use something specific from your life that can create tension and conflict.

While Tourette Syndrome is not a universal driving emotion, trying to understand oneself is. Another is accepting who we are. We all struggle to know who we are, some through horrendous difficulties. That's what makes a good story. Give your characters plenty of problems, lots of conflict, beat 'em down and have them fight to get back up. Give them big dreams and let them push on toward the goal. The more you do this, the more your readers will ask for more.

Think back on your journeys. We're all on one. They can make for good reading.

Until then,

Happy Thanksgiving, and great readin' & writin' from Lauraine