

On believing in your community



YA novelist Robby Weber discusses writing novels without a concrete process in place, portraying young adults authentically, and the necessity of hope.

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As told to Hurley Winkler, 2847 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Focus](#), [Adversity](#).

As we're having this conversation, your third book is about to come out. How are you feeling?

I'm excited, because I feel like this book is the one I'm the most proud of. I'm the most excited I've been for readers to get their hands on it, but it's also a little scary, because I put a lot of my own hopes and dreams and fears into it. Whatever people say, it will feel more personal in some ways than others.

I freaked out when I saw the title is *What Is This Feeling?* because I'm a huge musical theater nerd, so I immediately knew it was a Wicked reference. Did you take from your own background or interest in theater to write this book?

I was in the International Thespian Society in high school. Very extra, of course, right? And I think one of the things I loved most about theater was that it was all of these different kids from different cliques, or groups, or whatever you want to call them, that came together for this one thing, who maybe would've never crossed paths or been friends. That's something that is very much explored in the book. There's Sebastian, who is the tech kid and a loner, versus Teddy, who's the theater star and very outgoing. I feel like there are people I'm friends with who I might've never really hung out with or spent time with, but we just happened to all be performing.

As you write for a young adult audience, do you find yourself mining your own childhood/adolescent obsessions for potential material?

Absolutely. You also end up digging up old feelings, trying to remember what it felt like to have your first crush, or what it felt like to do something embarrassing, like follow someone on Instagram who's private and they don't follow you back. With those kinds of little things, you have to really put yourself back there and be like, "Oh my gosh, when I was 17, that felt like the end of the world." And I think that's one of the fun things. You get to really go into these emotional highs and emotional lows, and I think a lot of experiences we have (I mean, I guess speaking for myself), we almost bury a lot of them. We experienced something that maybe was really formative, and we don't, at that age, stop and think about what it means for us, or how we're going to interpret the world. It's interesting to write for young adults and think about these things that were formative for me that I didn't realize would be so impactful or would change how I perceive things.

How do you maintain the heat of those kinds of moments that you felt as a teenager when you have to revise and revise and revise a scene over and over? How do you make sure you keep that emotional center intact?

One thing that's consistent across all of my books is that all of my main characters are very dramatic. That is just obviously very easy for me to write, because I am a very dramatic person. Sometimes, I actually have had editors who'll say, "I think this reaction is a little bit too big or too strong." So, if anything, it's more about watering it down a little bit sometimes. I write first-person present tense, so I'm just really in it as

it's happening. And sometimes, especially because my characters are dramatic, very headstrong, very stubborn, I find myself letting them get overwhelmed in their emotions to the point of, "Okay, we got to dial it back just a little bit." That's not the hard part, though. It's keeping them in check, I think.

Do you think you'll always write in first-person present tense?

I don't know. I'm actually exploring potentially writing in third person. Even that one is still third-person present tense. I don't know why I struggle with past tense. I don't know if you listen to audiobooks, but I also really struggle with anything that's not first person in audio. I don't know if it's just that certain brains work differently, but first person really works for me in reading and writing. I want to write in third person to challenge myself, but it's not natural at all. But for reading and listening, typically, I need it to be first person. I need the same voice all the way through. I just need to feel consistency.

Do you think there's a parallel there between writing in the first person and your acting background? Embodying a character, so to speak?

Maybe. There might be something there, honestly. I do think you kind of get used to character work. And I think honestly where a lot of my strength in characters comes from. I remember, in AP English and in drama class, that was always something I really felt comfortable and confident in: discovering this character, the motives, all of those kinds of things. Plot is more difficult for me. Maybe there is something there about how you learn to interpret characters and people. It's really thinking about their backgrounds and their lens that they're seeing the world through, because I think that makes such a big difference, right? Theater really probably did impact a lot of how I write and study people.

How else do you get in the mindset to write about young people and for young people?

I try not to be too conscious of it. I try not to do anything. I try not to look up slang or get in on trends I'm not already engaging with, because, to me, I think it would feel really forced, and I don't want that. I've even seen some teens that would say, "This felt like an older person," but then, personally, I think most of the time that probably is when I'm trying to do it. I have also seen reviews where people think it's written too young. There is definitely this really interesting kind of middle ground between just authentically writing what the voice I hear nowadays, right? At the end of the day, we've all been young, and we all know certain things that are relatable and timeless, in terms of how young people interact.

In what ways does this new book feel different from your first two?

This one literally is different, because it takes place right before graduation, and the other two take place the summer before senior year. So there are these new fears and anxieties that the characters are dealing with. A lot of times, we want to create these characters that have the want, and the lie, and all these things, but sometimes there are multiple wants, multiple lies, and there are different reasons for that. Teddy's a little bit more complex in that way, that he kind of contradicts himself sometimes, and he's really optimistic, but he won't pursue songwriting because he doesn't think he's good enough.

Also, I got to write a fictional pop star for this book, and he's a really big character, and there are song lyrics, and I have a discography of all this stuff. It was really fun to explore fandom culture, and I just got to say so much. There are so many things that I want to say to young queer people, and just young people in general. I get messages from readers who are like, "I wish I had this when I was younger."

How has your writing process evolved across these books?

It's kind of funny, because I don't have a really concrete writing process. Every book, I literally have had a completely different process. I'll write at different times or in different places, so I kind of just let it happen however it's going to happen. I remember I wrote *What Is This Feeling?* a lot on weekends. I would just hole up for entire weekends, which is kind of insane. I don't know how I did that, but I remember I literally

would be like, "Okay, I'm blocking off my Saturday through Sunday," and I would just write. My Paris book, which comes out next year, I wrote a lot at, like, 5:00 AM until I had to get ready for work, which is not like me at all and very random. I don't know if there's some woo-woo thing with the characters or the stories, and with how they manifest in my brain or whatever, but it's always different. There's no structure to it at all.

Interestingly, your lack of concrete process feels similar to your approach to writing for young readers: not thinking about it too much, not really letting it be a factor. You're approaching it in a way that makes sense to you in the moment. I think that's a great thing. I think more writers should do that.

Well, I'm such an over-thinker. I want to plan everything, and I'm so particular, and I think it's the one area where it's not for me to control or plan. I mean, obviously, you do have to plan. If it were up to me, I would not write outlines. You have to be able to give your editor an outline, but I would love to just write and see what happens.

Do you think you'll ever try writing that way?

I don't know. Unless you're, I guess, really, really skilled at storytelling, you're just going to have so much work on the backend of making that work for you. Maybe one day, if I just have all the time in the world. I imagine that would take a lot of editing. But it's also worth it, because you get this really authentic, raw version of the story that unfolds the way it should without you feeling like you're forcing any of it.

Do you bring in other readers to take a look at drafts along the way, or do you just show your agent?

Just my agent. It's almost superstitious. At first, I don't know if it was a confidence thing or what, but even when I was trying to get an agent, it wasn't something where I wanted to have beta readers. I just always felt like it was a very personal thing, even though I wanted to get published and be seen by all these people. I kind of just stuck to the idea that my agent will see it, my editor, and that's it.

I've found when I keep things a little closer to my chest, it always feels better, because I'm more true to myself, and not true to a bunch of other readers.

Maybe that is a big part of it. I think sometimes you just don't want to hear. It's almost like confirmation bias, I guess. You're seeking that. At least, I think that's what it is. To me, if I were giving people my book before it's out, I would be expecting or seeking confirmation bias. I want them to say, "I love this," and if they don't, it's like, "Well, what do I do now?" I think that's probably a big part of it subconsciously: not wanting to get too many opinions.

Are you a deadline-driven writer?

Yes. Luckily, now I'm at a point where my agent or editor will set deadlines, and that external deadline is really good for me. On my own, I might put something off, because there's so much of writing that feels really nebulous and out of our control. A lot of these ideas have to marinate or characters have to form. But somehow, the deadline? I don't know if it's subconscious, but it makes that happen faster. It's like you have to figure things out. So I love a good deadline. The only way I would probably get things done, I think, is by having a deadline. If I'm setting it myself, I'll try to make it as short as possible so I don't procrastinate and waste a bunch of time.

What's a short deadline to you?

I've done one where I wrote 2,000 words a day for 30 days, which was just really hard. I think I saw that Emily Henry, actually, was the one who said, "I'll do 2,000 words a day," and I think before that, I had seen people say 1,000 or 1,500, and I was like, "Okay, if she can do it." And she, I think, has this really sound reasoning, in that the first draft, there are going to be so many things that you cut or so many things that you'll change; don't get too married to it. So if I have a good outline, I can get that many pages or words done a day, and then

I just feel good about myself and my progress. And then, once it's done, then you can kind of take a step back, and be like, "Okay, what do we need to change?" I committed to that for my fourth book, and it worked somehow. I mean, the draft obviously did need a lot of work. The edits: there were many of them. But also, I felt good because I didn't feel like I wasted any time.

Did you always know you wanted to write for young adults?

Yes, actually, now that you say that. I don't know if anyone's ever asked me that specific question. I wrote middle grade in high school. It was very obviously Harry Potter-inspired, because everyone does that. But then, everything else I did was teen. So I think I always knew. I had my reading renaissance as a teen. I grew up reading a lot of books, but then, as a teenager, just really found such a profound love for it. And then authors like John Green and [Rainbow Rowell](#) came along. When I was in college, that's when I was like, "Oh, wait, not only do I want to write for teens, but the kinds of books that I like are also possible for teens." It just all kind of clicked.

The theme of queer joy plays a big role in your books. Is that something you really craved as a young person, seeing that represented in books?

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it sounds silly, because we see so much representation now that it's almost probably hard to believe, but growing up, there wasn't any really. There would be a character on 90210 who was gay, and that was the whole plot line was him being gay, right? There wasn't the same thing as there is now with gay characters' stories having full arcs, with romances and friendships and all these things. I just want to be able to give queer teens a story where they see themselves, and it's not just about coming out or experiencing trauma or pain.

You're living in Florida writing gay teen romances. We're living in the land of book bans. What motivates you to keep writing here in Florida?

I do think there are two schools of thought, and I understand both. I think I'm a little bit more of that stay-and-fight mentality. I could go somewhere else, but these teens and these communities aren't going anywhere. They're still going to be here. So I think they need people who stand up and write those stories and believe in them, to make a brighter future for them to be here just as much as anyone else. I want to show that it's not going to stop me if someone's going to try to ban a book or anything like that. It really motivates me, because it's so horrific to think of these teens hearing about books being banned just because a character is similar to them and their experience of the world. I think that's just really psychologically damaging. That's really why I write what I write and continue to stay and fight.

You say it motivates you. Do you have days where it does get you down, and it feels like there's an impossibility to it?

Definitely. I think there are days when the reality of how big these people and their decisions are will hit me. It's tough when it feels so much bigger than anything one of us can do, but I think that's the important thing to recognize. The point of queer joy and optimism is remembering that it is tough, but without the hope and the optimism, we just end up giving up. We just kind of have to double down on what we believe and what we know is right.

Robby Weber recommends:

[Funny Story](#) by Emily Henry.

[Luca](#). I just saw it. It's the cutest movie.

[Nerds Gummy Clusters](#). The rainbow kind, not the berry kind.

[Pine Ridge chenin blanc + viognier](#). It's \$12 at Target.

Name

Robby Weber

Vocation

YA novelist

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