

An Interview with Jodi Lynn Anderson

by Ani Kazarian



Jodi Lynn Anderson

Jodi Lynn Anderson is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Peaches*, *Tiger Lily*, and the *May Bird Trilogy*. Her latest book, *My Diary from the Edge of the World*, was released in November 2015. I had the extreme good fortune of meeting Jodi several years ago during our first residency at Bennington College. We started our MFA together and graduated together—an experience for which I will always be grateful. Over the residencies, we climbed trees together, chased fireflies, drank wine at the “End of the World,” and practiced prenatal yoga in her dorm room. The Jodi I’ve come to know is every bit as magical as her writing. Her thoughts and actions are guided by intuitive insight and a rare honesty. I am thrilled to have her as a dear friend, and honored to have done this interview with her.

As a woman in her thirties, I don't know if I want to have children. But I'm positive that I want to finish my novel and write several other books. Although I know many women who have children and successful careers that they're passionate about, I still harbor a deep fear—how can I be a writer *and* a mother? I regularly feel overwhelmed in life as it is, how does one

have time, energy, creativity, and children?

With these questions, I reached out to Jodi, who became the mother of a beautiful boy just over a year ago, and continues to write often, and well. Here's her take on being a writer and a new mother.

AK: When did you begin writing? As in, how old were you or is there a specific moment you recall as being “the one” that alerted you to the fact that you're a writer?

JLA: As a kid I kept obsessive diaries. We moved to Hong Kong when I was 13, and before we left I buried them all in the woods behind my house (in New Jersey). I think the burying had a lot to do with why I was writing in general. It was my way of pinning things down— I was a nostalgic little kid and I hated that time was passing and I wanted to hold onto things.

I'd say it's only recently that I've started to think of myself comfortably as a writer. When I started getting published, there was this huge gap between what I was writing vs. finding my own voice and being honest. What I knew how to write for publication was really different from what I loved writing for myself. I think these days my stories are starting to line up much more with what's inside and what I care about most deeply; that makes me feel like a writer more than anything else that's happened.

AK: Your most recent books, and, really, the majority of your books, seem to center around friendship and community wrapped up in magic. Do you do this consciously, or are these the things you naturally hold most dear to you?

JLA: I still see things pretty similarly to how I saw them as a kid—I'll be driving along the highway and see a curled up rug on the roadside and my first thought is, "Oh a zebra got hit by a car!" I tend to see things a little magically, for better or worse. So I try to be true to that as much as I can, though I'm really not sure how. A lot of my journey as a writer has been trying to figure that out. How do I weave magic into stories that have emotional depth? What's real about the idea of magic—like, why do I care so much? Same with writing about time and time passing and how magic seems to come into play there. There's something that always pulls me back to those things but I'm not sure what. I don't know if I'll ever get there. I'm trying.

With friendships, etc. ... I think coming from a young adult background, I started publishing when there were so many young adult books coming out about romantic relationships—especially relationships with the guy who seems like an asshole at first but isn't. I wanted to write about girls loving each other, or about loving guys who seem like assholes who actually turn out to be assholes. I think that's how I started writing about friendships.

AK: Do you have a favorite one out of all of your books?

JLA: I really like my middle grade book that just came out, *My Diary from the Edge of the World*. I drew from a lot of experiences with my family but threaded it with fantasy. And the process felt really organic—I didn't feel like I was getting lost in the weeds trying to create a plot. The characters seemed to create the plot and vice versa. Usually I'm left feeling like much of what I wrote wasn't completely necessary. I like it when it all feels elemental—like none of it is extra. But that hardly ever happens.

AK: For the last ten years or so, what has been your writing routine? As in,

where do you write, when do you write?

JLA: Before I had my son, I kept a traditional work day and work week so that when most of my friends were free, I was too. That took me a long time to learn—that keeping a traditional schedule made my quality of life better. Now I write for five hours, four days a week, because that's when I have a babysitter. My days were much flabbier before. Now I get to my desk and charge. It's actually nice in a way to have that pressure. It makes me focus.

AK: Do you ever experience writer's block?

JLA: I experience a lot of days where I hate the book and feel like a huge idiot and I just sit and Google things that make me feel terrible, like this woman who wronged me in the late nineties and is hugely successful. I don't know—is that writer's block? I don't run out of ideas but I run out of ability to get anything down intelligently, and I get lazy, or I just go into this hole of ... how can I have been doing this this long and not be better at such and such? It's like Molasses Swamp. But it's temporary.

AK: How do you pull yourself out of it?

JLA: Sometimes walking away works. I used to run a lot and that helped, big time. Music. Anything to take a brief vacation, where I'm mentally away. But sometimes the only thing is to sit and sit and feel miserable until something comes loose.

AK: And you recently had a baby (congratulations!). How did that change your writing routine?

JLA: My writing time became scarce and specific. I can't go a minute over-time because my babysitter's got to go to other jobs or get her own stuff done. But I'm lucky enough to have her twenty hours a

week. And those hours are so precious now, and I appreciate them a lot more. I also end up emailing myself from a phone all day while I'm watching my son—thoughts that I can't sit down at my computer to flesh out. I go through my emails to myself every few days and transfer everything to all my documents.

AK: Do you feel that being a mother has changed how you view writing?

JLA: There's a lot less angst about it, I guess! My ego has mostly shriveled up for the short term and I'm not as worried about feeling exposed or all my mistakes or blind spots, partly because physically I'm literally covered in poo and unshowered so much of the time, and partly because my self-consciousness has taken a backseat to this human I got lucky enough to be put in charge of. I mean, my creative failures matter to me but they don't wrench my guts right now.

AK: Has being a mother changed what you want to write about?

JLA: Not yet. Not at all. Sorry, boring answer!

AK: What have been some of the new challenges that you've experienced as a new mother and a writer?

JLA: I think the biggest challenge, and what really surprised me, was how hard it is to mix nursing and working. And that's coming from the luxurious position of working at home where I had every advantage to make it happen which I know is rare. And then nursing becomes a slippery slope because it becomes being the one with the baby all day, which means being an expert on all the baby behaviors, being the one getting up all night. ... My husband is a great partner and we do our best, but it's never completely equal. That my physiology should have such an influence over my life was something that, for some reason, I wasn't prepared for at all.

AK: What do you do when you sort of feel like you need a break?

JLA: After Owen goes to bed, we watch a comedy and have a drink. It probably sounds boring but it feels incredible.

AK: A lot of mothers mention feeling guilty working instead of spending time with their children, is this something you've experienced?

JLA: I don't feel guilty with work. I feel guilty about a ton of other things (like, it seems every time I put Owen down I knock him over). But not work. I try to be careful about feeling guilty because it's such a trap.

AK: Is there advice you can offer to women writers who maybe think about having children but are afraid it will take away from their writing life?

JLA: I'm coming from such a uniquely privileged situation—with childcare designated just for writing time and an income that comes from my work—that I'd feel pretty silly giving advice. I have mom friends who can only write in their spare moments ... at naps, at night, after work, before work ... and all I know is that it's this daunting and rigorous thing.

BIO:

Jodi Lynn Anderson grew up in a lake town in northern New Jersey where she spent much of her time wandering the woods with her cat. She's been an admirer of stories and all things magical from an early age. Her recent release, a middle grade novel entitled My Diary from the Edge of the World, is a Publishers Weekly Best Book of 2015 and an IndieNext selection. She lives in Asheville, NC with her husband and their young son, and holds an MFA from Bennington College.