



The Art of Writing a Novel

Article Author:

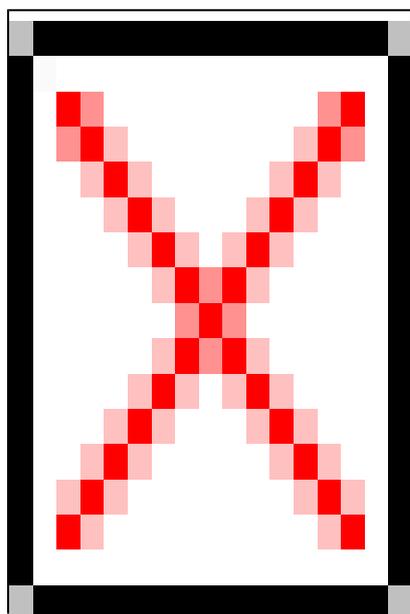
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Byline:

by **Lisa Williamson**

Lisa Williamson's debut novel, *The Art of Being Normal* was published in hardback in January 2015. Twelve months later, and on its paperback release, she reflects on her journey from girl with a dream and a laptop, to bona-fide published author.



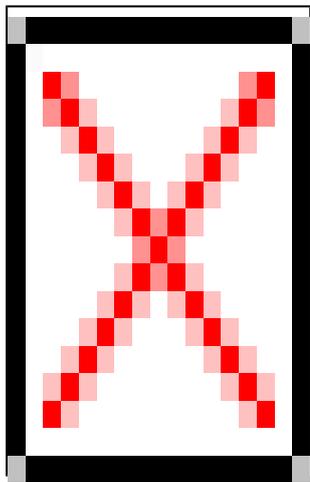
I'd been writing in my spare time for several years when I began working on **The Art of Being Normal**. As an actor, I supported myself between roles with admin jobs and between 2010 and 2012 I worked as an administrator at the Gender Identity Development Service, the NHS service for under-eighteens struggling with their gender identity. The patients' stories I heard inspired me to write a story from the point of view of a transgender teenager.

Although writing is typically painted as a rather solitary pursuit, I consider **The Art of Being Normal** a true team effort and owe a great deal to a number of very clever people. In August 2014 I was at crisis point. I'd been working on a story about a transgender teenager and his friendship with the new boy at school for the past eighteen months. I knew I had something but with the middle section still a complete muddle, I had no idea how to harness it. Enter the Golden Egg Academy, a mentoring and editorial service designed specifically to assist children's and young adult writers. Here I was lucky enough to be mentored by Bella Pearson, editor of children's modern classics like **The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas** and **Before I Die**. Her expertise transformed my manuscript, a few simple suggestions untangling my messy plot and finally allowing me to confidently type 'The End'. By early 2014, I had a new shiny draft ready to go. Following an introduction from Bella, I signed with literary agent Catherine Clarke and the manuscript was quickly submitted to nineteen different publishers. The weeks that followed were a messy blur of constant inbox refreshing and meetings and general disbelief that actual real-life publishing people liked and wanted the book I'd written in my bedroom while wearing jogging bottoms and thermal socks.

David Fickling Books are small, independent and full of passion, and the moment I met them I knew they were the

publisher for me. The publishing industry is notoriously slow. Many authors experience a two-year gap between signing a deal with a publisher and seeing their book in the shops for the first time. My experience was almost the opposite. David Fickling Books pride themselves on their nimbleness, and expressed a keenness to publish **The Art of Being Normal** as soon as realistically possible. Their instincts were right. 2015 marked unprecedented coverage of transgender issues in the arts and media, and a January release date allowed **The Art of Being Normal** to be a tiny (and very proud) part of this.

The months preceding publication were thrilling and terrifying in equal measures. I juggled jubilation at glimpsing cover



art for the first time, with fear no one would like the book I'd poured blood, sweat and far too many tears into. By New Year's Eve 2014, I was a nervous wreck with almost non-existent eyebrows (their falling out is a sign of stress apparently). Thankfully, this state didn't last. In fact, seeing **The Art of Being Normal** in the shops finally allowed me to relax. I had done everything I could; my only option was to sit tight and wait to see if it was enough

Social media meant feedback was immediate. Within days I began to receive tweets and emails from real-life readers of all ages, backgrounds and gender identities, and I've been simultaneously humbled and blown away by every single one. Some were from transgender teenagers simply thanking me for including a character whose gender identity mirrored theirs, or letting me know they were using the book as a tool to help others understand their transition. Others were from young people who felt like outsiders and identified with the book's rejection of the concept of 'normal'. Others confessed their perceptions of gender and identity had been challenged or even changed. I've been especially delighted every time a reader questions a character's decision-making or speculates as to what might happen to them next. I love the idea that David, Leo and co have taken on lives of their own, independent from the story, and are no longer solely my creation. I've spoken in schools and at literary festivals up and down the country and can confirm there is probably no greater joy than meeting a reader clutching a dog-eared copy of your book to be signed.

I am currently working on a second book. It is another standalone story and has taken me a lot longer than I thought it would! Although having a contract to write a second book is a wonderful privilege, it is also loaded with pressure and expectation and the temptation to second-guess what readers might want. Engaging with readers on a regular basis acts as a constant reminder of why I write - to hopefully move and entertain others, but at the same time I'm aware of not writing to order; a story that doesn't come from the heart simply won't work. Readers are canny; they can sniff out a faker from a mile off, which is perhaps why I've taken a little longer than planned to get my second book off the ground. Finally though, my head and heart have aligned, and with the encouragement of those around me (the children's publishing world is quite extraordinarily supportive), I'm finally on track to finish something I can feel proud of.

My first year as a published author has certainly been a steep learning curve, but it's one I wouldn't change for the world.

The Art of Being Normal is published in paperback by David Fickling Books in January, 978-1-9102-0052-0, £7.99.

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