

## Interview with a Children's Book Writer... Chris Grabenstein



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*New York Times* bestselling author, Chris Grabenstein won his first prize for writing in the fifth grade. Later he wrote scripts, even for the famous Muppets, and for almost twenty years he wrote radio and television commercials. He wrote more than 70 books, and currently he is working on several projects that include new adventures of Mr. Lemoncello. He is married to J.J., with whom he co-authored the book **Shine!**. The two live with their two cats in New York City.

Here are some of the books written by the famous author: **The Island of Dr. Libris**, **Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library**, **Mr. Lemoncello's Library Olympics**, **Mr. Lemoncello's Great Library Race**, **Mr. Lemoncello's All-Star Breakout Game**, the **Wonderland** series, **Haunted Mystery** series. Together with James Patterson wrote, among others: **Word of Mouse**, the series: **Treasure Hunters**, **House of Robots**, **I Funny**, **Max Einstein**.



1. How long did it take you until you wrote your first book? What triggered that moment?

In 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I was bad at sports but found that I could “be cool” and make my friends laugh at comic books I wrote and drew and at talent show skits I scripted. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, my English teacher wrote in the margins of one of my papers that I would make my living as a writer someday. And in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I wrote a “What I Want To Be When I Grow Up” essay about becoming a writer or a comedian. So basically, I’m living my 8<sup>th</sup> grade dream!

After college, when I was living and working in New York City, I still held on to my dream of being a writer and, after performing improv comedy and writing for the Muppets, landed a job in advertising writing TV and radio commercials. Nineteen years later, when I was ready to leave advertising, I remembered that my first boss, James Patterson, had a pretty good second career as an author. That made me realize that there might be a connection between attention-grabbing commercials and page-turning books. So, in a way, James Patterson (with whom I’m now co-author) was my inspiration for becoming an author!

My first book for children was *The Crossroads*. I was inspired by a tree I saw while jogging one morning in the Berkshire Mountains. It had a rusty bucket filled with plastic flowers and a white wooden cross nailed to its bark. So, I knew it was a memorial to someone who had crashed into that tree and died. Then I said to myself, What if... the ghost of the person who crashed into the tree is trapped beneath its bark? What if the tree’s roots were holding him here on earth? What if he doesn’t like me jogging past the spot where he died? So I ran my fastest mile ever back to my hotel, wrote all that down, and that’s how *The Crossroads* got started.

2. *How do you get your ideas, inspiration?*

I usually get ideas by seeing something that's a little out of the ordinary and pondering "What if?" That's how I got the idea for *Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library* – after visiting a school with a brand new library, which had been donated by a very generous benefactor. Childhood memories are another source for stories, such as my funny ode to my family's Florida vacations, the *Welcome to Wonderland* series.

3. *Which is the essential ingredient for a story to be good?*

I like to write mysteries that are also funny. My favorite books to read are page-turners with a puzzle that needs to be solved so those are my favorite books to write. Mysteries. Ghost stories. Thrillers. Puzzle mysteries. I try to construct my tales like a roller coaster ride: You're screaming with terror one minute, laughing the next, screaming again, laughing, scream, laugh.

4. *What is one of the things you have learned from writing books?*

The fun part is the writing. Everything else is in someone else's hands. So, when you write, write for yourself and to entertain your audience. The praise doesn't always come. And there are haters who will hate even the books other readers love.

5. *What are you going to write next?*

I am working on the third book in my *Smartest Kid in the Universe* series, which is subtitled *Evil Genius*. I am also working with James Patterson on a third *Jacky Ha-Ha*, a ninth *Treasure Hunters* and a second *Word of Mouse*. My wife J.J. and I are also working on what we'll call a "secret project", until, hopefully, a publisher picks it up!

6. *What do you like to do when you are not writing?*

My wife J.J. and I live in New York City, and we enjoy many adventures here. I enjoy going for walks every day, which gives me time to think about my writing. We also have two cats, Phoebe Squeak and Luigi, who enjoy getting as much of my attention as possible.



7. *What was / is the use of reading for you?*

To go new places, learn new things, and meet new and very interesting characters.

8. *What childhood books would you like to read again?*

Unfortunately, my love of reading and writing didn't come from any of the children's books being published when I was a kid (I would've loved Edward Eager's 1954 book *Half Magic* – if only I'd known it existed).

Back in the 1960s, when I was the same age as the majority of my readers (4th - 6th grade) we didn't read books in school. Nope. We had... SHUDDER... something called SRA.

It was a big box of color-tabbed essays, usually sitting on a shelf at the back of the classroom. When you read one color and answered all the "how well did you read?" questions correctly, you moved on to the next color. When you got to the final color (was it purple? silver? gold?), the teacher might let you go read an actual book.

No, my love for words, reading, and writing came from "the usual gang of idiots" at MAD magazine. I bought my first subscription with \$5 I got for my tenth birthday. I saved up my money all year so I could purchase MAD books – collections of previously published material – every summer when my family went on vacation to Florida. There was a store in St. Petersburg called Webb City that always had a wide selection of MAD books on sale. And they used to cost less than 50 cents.

MAD taught me the power of words, humor, and satire. They used to knock the stuffing out of everything – movies, TV shows, politicians, advertisements. Nothing was sacred. And they did it all with words and pictures.

Later, in middle school, when I became the target of bullies, I think it was the spirit of MAD that helped me fight back with my wits instead of my fists.

And, yes, I still subscribe to MAD to this day!

9. *What is the most beautiful part of being a writer?*

The best part is the actual writing, getting lost in a world that you create with characters you dream up where everything turns out the way you wish life would.

10. *A tip for young writers.*

Read and write every day. Whether it's 20 minutes or 2 hours, make sure to write every day. It helps you to build the discipline that you need. Read the type of writing that you would like to write. If you really like mysteries, then read a lot of mysteries. If you like historical fiction, then read a lot of historical fiction. But read other genres too. You may be the first to combine genres and create a new kind.

As far as structure, make sure your story has a beginning, a middle and a twist. It can help to start by writing short stories and then make the next short story a paragraph or a page longer, making sure to incorporate the structure. That may sound simple but that is the key to a strong story. EVERYTHING IN THE STORY should and must be there for a reason. As the playwright Anton Chekov once said, if there is a rifle on the set in the first act, someone better fire it before the third act is through.

Writing stories is a lot like writing a joke. Everything in a joke leads up to the punchline. Everything in a story builds to your ending. Read famous short stories like the *Cask of Amontillado* by Edgar Allan Poe or the *Ransom of Red Chief* by O. Henry. Also, if you can, watch old *Twilight Zone* episodes. Everything in those stories builds to a payoff at the end. If you can master that, you will have mastered the art of storytelling.