

INTERVIEW -

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Maryland-born, California-raised, Betsy R. Rosenthal (California-Berkeley) started her career as a civil rights attorney. When she and her husband had their second child, Betsy's demanding career, which required travel and evening meetings, consumed too much time and energy away from her kids. After seven years, she left the practice of law to pursue her lifelong passion for writing and to be more of a hands-on mom. "I like to think that attending law school and working as a lawyer was simply a detour for me," she says. Her first published works were personal essays that appeared in publications such as the Los Angeles Times, *Mothering* magazine and *The Baltimore Sun*, to name a few. Betsy also writes poetry and has ghost authored two books and penned seven children's books. Her newest and first historical fiction for children ages 9-13, *When Lightnin' Struck*, came out in February. Readers follow the story of James, an 11-year-old boy who struggles to find his purpose in life and discovers a family secret along the way. Betsy graciously stepped away from her computer (a feat when you're a writer whose creative juices are flowing!) to chat with us about her writing career and latest book.



DID YOU ALWAYS WANT TO BECOME A CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHOR?

Not really. My dream from childhood was to be a revered author and poet, but I hadn't thought about which genre. Naively, I thought I'd write the next great American novel. And I certainly hadn't considered the bumpy road I'd have to travel to pursue writing and publishing.



WHAT INSPIRES YOUR STORIES?

Most of the essays I've written have been inspired by the antics of my three kids and husband. Each one of the picture books has in some way or another been seeded by a scenario involving my kids. Also, I've tried to weave into every book some special interest of mine, such as badminton for instance. My first middle-grade novel [for ages 8-12] is based entirely on my mom's childhood growing up during the Depression in a family of 12 children. I always wanted to capture my mom's and her siblings' memories in a book. It became more important to me than ever after my mom was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and I knew that her memories would soon fade.

HOW LONG DID YOU WORK ON *WHEN LIGHTNIN' STRUCK*?

Because I did extensive research on the historical period and had to learn what I could about the setting of the story— Odessa, Texas — and the ancestral backgrounds of the characters, I spent well over 10 years on the research and writing of this book. I even visited Gerona, Spain, as part of my research (you'll understand the reference if you read the book!).

DO YOU EVER GO ON BOOK TOURS?

Before the pandemic, I traveled to libraries, schools and bookstores in California (with one visit to Baltimore) to talk about my books. I also did presentations at local venues in Southern California. Most recently, I participated in a virtual book event for the L.A. Public Library.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT BEING A WRITER?

I love the process. Every time I sit down to work on a story or poem, it's as if I'm doing a difficult puzzle. I enjoy the challenge of figuring out what fits where, what is the perfect turn of phrase to use, and what is the next piece of the story or line of the poem. I like taking a bunch of disparate words, sentences and ideas and cohesively assembling them so that a complete picture emerges.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON CURRENTLY?

I'm working on a novelization of a humorous screen play about a koala. I'm also revising my novel for adults that I've worked on for more than 20 years. I'm motivated to complete it because the setting is none other than the University of California, Berkeley, my alma mater.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO HAVE A PRODUCTIVE WRITING SESSION?

The first is BIC (butt in chair), something I remind myself often, and the second is a cup of coffee in one of my special mugs. My favorite mug reads, "Everyone except the voices in my head needs to leave me alone so I can write."

HOW DO YOU UNWIND AFTER A LONG DAY?

I'll cook dinner, and often my husband and I will plop on the couch and watch a favorite TV show (or two or three or...). We're perfecting the art of binge-watching!

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN A FEW WORDS OR PHRASES.

I'm tenacious, industrious, curious, creative and overly inquisitive, as evidenced by my relentless interrogations (just ask my family). On second thought, don't ask them.

To learn more about Betsy and her books, visit BetsyRosenthal.com.

