

## Elana K. Arnold, Witness to the Well

An Interview with L. M. Quraishi  
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*Bearing witness to existence is the work of art.*

—Elana K. Arnold

Award-winning and prolific author Elana K. Arnold brings an extravagant awareness to her art. She divides the creative process into three distinct stages—art, craft, and only then business—emphasizing the importance of not boxing yourself in by telling yourself no when you’re just beginning a project. For example, she says that “in early writing, in creating, in art which is the dredging up, the discovery and the mucking about—I think I have zero responsibility to the reader.” She goes on to explain that even the phrase “writers for children” is problematic because it’s not the point. “The point is to write about the experiences that take place in adolescence and childhood.” When it finally comes to the business side of things, she distinguishes between her audiences, bringing different considerations to her work depending on whether it’s for very young children—in which case she’s creating something that’s more of a hybrid between art and a “product”—and her young adult work where she unapologetically dredges pain. No matter the format, she believes firmly that “the desire to keep someone innocent often just means keeping them ignorant, and if they’re ignorant they’re not armed. Ignorance is more dangerous than awareness of pain.” What connects raw art to products the author can feel proud to offer young readers is the deliberate application of highly skilled craft.

More than any other author I spoke with, Arnold was able to explicitly describe the mechanisms for the alchemy of pain through the craft of writing. When I asked her at what point

in her process she experiences the emotion of her material, she responded that “it takes...many years before the things that happened become raw material for [my writing. They’re] the colors in my toolkit, and I get to decide how to mix them. It’s like feeling the weave of a knit blanket and where it’s itchy and where it’s soft and where it’s plush. It’s different from feeling emotional pain.” She told the story of a time she had to write a scene she knew would be difficult, about cruelty to an animal:

I took myself out to dinner, [a restaurant with] a fireplace.... I had a limited amount of time. I ate something delicious, I drank this delicious wine, I sat by this delicious warmth, surrounded by people having an excellent time, and wrote this really rough scene. It gave me some protection and I also think it kept the scene from being melodramatic. Because if you allow yourself to suffer deeply while writing about suffering deeply, I think you can tip too far. I don’t think you have to suffer to write about suffering.

In fact, she says, some of the scenes her readers tell her break them open don’t hurt at all to write; “The experience of writing them was like going into this tunnel and producing this thing. It’s very rewarding.” Drilling down on the idea of the tunnel of craft, Arnold proposed that “the point of art is about digesting,” and differentiated between art and activism with this metaphor: “Digestion goes in. Activism is something that comes out.” Whenever she finds herself or other authors getting caught up in their message, this falls into the category of “regurgitation.” As for Arnold, she prefers “the gross murky work of art. It’s...transformation.” As artists, I suggested, we take on other people’s pain and feel it in ourselves. Like oysters, we transform that pain through story into pearls.

A story she spent a lifetime digesting was her nana’s experience of being Jewish in Romania during World War II, a story her nana told over tea and chocolates and many, many

years. In *The Blood Years*, Arnold takes the pieces of her nana's story and the history of the six million Jewish people killed in the Holocaust, and "sift[s] gently and delicately and reverently through the shards" in an effort "to transform pain into art, to embrace ambiguity, and to find beauty in even the ugliest of moments" (374, 2). Her forward describes the way her nana shared her history in iterations, editing out the worst parts to spare the younger Arnold, and near the end of her life, trusting her adult granddaughter with much more (2). The author's process of telling the story also took many iterations, in the form of drafts her editor initially told her were too removed. Arnold says "the way [my nana] told me the story, it took a lifetime...to go through the process of unveiling. Maybe that's why it took so many years for me to tell the story; I had to tell the story to myself the same way she told it to me, with all these levels of protection."

I admired the way that her nana's approach to storytelling incorporated the protections I see in so many other stories that metabolize pain, allowing readers and listeners to slowly build awareness and understanding, and grow in agency, all of which Arnold mirrored in *The Blood Years*, as a "meta way...of bearing witness to what [her] grandmother had given her." When I asked Arnold what it was like to write to about someone else's trauma, she replied emphatically, "I didn't want to hurt my nana." It took her until draft five to realize she had to let her character get hurt, but eventually the craft of revision worked as "exposure therapy: enough drafts and enough thinking and she was finally able to approach [her] work as a reader." That's when she decided to include some of the more horrific experiences her nana had shared.

When Arnold reflected on the ways that she's borne witness to her own pain in her work over the years, she described her realization that many of her books come in thematic sets according to what she was metabolizing at the time. For example, she now views *Infandous* and *What Girls Are Made Of* as a duology exploring embodied shame. "I think that's a skill I have as

a writer—being willing to use what I have. After working on those books for almost five years, I don't feel that embodied shame anymore.” Anyone who's had the privilege of being Arnold's student has probably heard her talk about “emptying the well” as a metaphor for putting everything you have into your current work, never fearing that the well will fill again with more source material. “After I drank away all the shame water, my well was refilled with a crystalline rage,” she explained next, leading to the thematic duology of *Damsel* and *Red Hood*. “Now,” she says, “I'm more interested in ambiguity.”

There's nothing ambiguous about the gifts Elana K. Arnold offers her readers and her students. Navigating the layers of her own craft with an awakened sense of the effect of her words, she consciously builds the protections and awareness she and readers need to wrestle with painful truths and emerge empowered. For her, pain is an essential part of art's imperative: “You make art out of what you have. A lot of what I have is painful. It's hard to be a person. There's pain everywhere. To not make art out of it would be such a waste of material. How lucky are we to get to experience pain! It's the same as being alive.”

#### Works Cited

- Arnold, Elana K. *Damsel*. New York: Balzer + Bray, 2018.
- . *Infamous*. Carolrhoda Lab ®, 2017.
- . *Red Hood*. Balzer + Bray, 2020.
- . *The Blood Years*. Balzer + Bray, 2023.