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Fighting for Truth

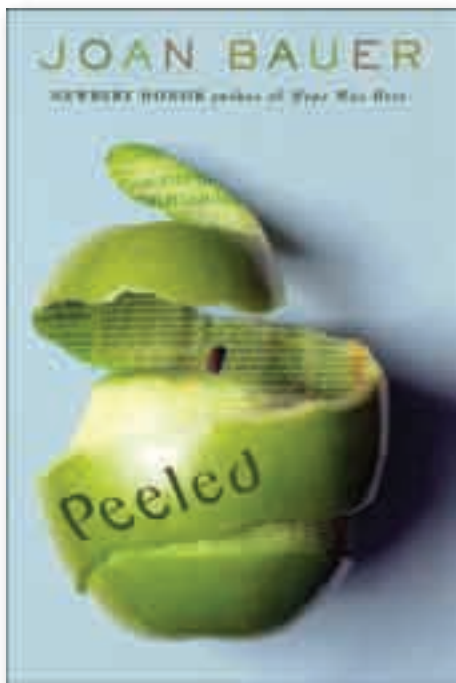
Joan Bauer

I am writing this column in September of 2008, and you will be reading it in spring of 2009. Right now I am watching the trajectory of Hurricane Gustav and praying the levees will hold in New Orleans; I am trying to not become wearied by the presidential race and to pay attention to the important points on both sides. Right now I need a vacation and won't be getting one; I am profoundly grateful that my mother has gone into remission with her cancer; my neighbor's boy just informed me that, when he went on vacation, his baseball

team lost every game because he's the best pitcher. My puppy Max was neutered recently, and he's looking at me in a way that's making me feel guilty. A boy named Cody sent me an e-mail about my book *Stand Tall*. He told me that everything that happened to Tree had happened to him—right down to his very own dog having a near-death experience. I wonder what the issues will be in the spring of 2009? What stories will I be writing? What words and images will stick in my heart from the things barreling through my life today?

There's a big part of me that doesn't want change, and yet every time I sit down to write, I'm evoking it in a way, insisting that my characters go through life changing passages, insisting they be resilient, keep going, keep learning, and not give up (at least not forever). As a novelist, I am greatly stirred by the big and small moments of the day. I don't always understand how they wind up in my stories, but I know that they do. I feel the heartbeats long before my characters are born. There's always a touch of anger in my books. It's great therapy for me to write about things that utterly irritate me. I had lots of anger issues in play when I wrote my latest novel *Peeled*. In 247 pages I took on fear, lies, manipulation, propaganda, fear-mongering, and eminent domain, and then I fought them back with truth, honest journalism, good mentoring, courage, and the joys of farm-fresh produce.

How can you work with kids today? I mean, they're not paying attention, they're not reading, they don't care about excellence, and it's just going to get worse. But there's that moment when the other truth, the one fueled by passion, wins the day.



Whenever I think about Hildy Biddle, my teenage protagonist in *Peeled*, I think about a young woman I met in Kazakhstan. Few people would draw the line from Hildy, a high school reporter in apple country, New York, to a communications major in Kazakhstan. I was there as part of the State Department's professional speakers program, and she was there to interview me. I must tell you that before I left on that trip, I was struggling with Hildy Biddle's character. I couldn't quite find her voice. I knew she was fired up about being a reporter and getting the story right, but she didn't have the fire in her belly. This nineteen-year-old Kazakh woman came up to me, gleaming. She wanted to know about my books, how I felt about her country; she wanted to know what I'm writing now.

"I'm writing about a reporter who doesn't give up," I explained. "About a town that's getting scared for all the wrong reasons."

"And she, your reporter, she has to find the truth. Yes?"

"Yes," I assured her.

"And she will not stop until she finds this?"

I nodded.

"But that's me," she said excitedly. "I am this girl. I must be a reporter. I must find the truth!"

That's a big statement in a country that has a state-run press, but the greater truth did not elude me. There in Almaty, Kazakhstan, a country that I'd only recently learned how to spell, was the embodiment of my Hildy Biddle—a passionate, focused lover of truth.

It's not easy to be in love with truth; there's so much out there that is fake. But in *Peeled*, more than anything, I wanted to show that truth is worth fighting for. If we're being lied to, we need to find the truth. If we're being manipulated by the media or anything or anyone, it will darken our perspective until we open the curtains and let the light of truth in. Students are particularly sensitive to this. They hate being lied to; they hate being used. But is it possible for one person to stand up and say "I don't think so" to the media manipulation of the day?

Not without a support system. In *Peeled* I've created two of my all-time favorite adult characters—Minska, a cafe owner who grew up in Communist Poland and watched the Solidarity Movement bring freedom to her country, and Baker Polton, an irritated, caustic journalist who can't be bothered by teenage reporters. At first, he tries to talk Hildy out of her passion for reporting; the field is changing too much.

"They're going to ask you to believe that entertainment is news. What are you going to tell them? They're going to put things that don't matter on the front page and the ones that do on page twenty. They're going to tell you that flash and sex sell papers and that's all people are looking for these days. They're going to reduce your copy to sound bites and slogans and if they can figure out how to make a scratch-and-sniff midsize daily, believe me, they'll do it."

It's the kind of diatribe we all have to face: "How can you work with kids today? I mean, they're not paying attention; they're not reading; they don't care about excellence; and it's just going to get worse." But there's that moment when the other truth, the one fueled by passion, wins the day. Because when you love books, when you know how they can change a life, you raise the banner high and march into the fray.

The truth is worth fighting for.

Joan Bauer grew up in River Forest, IL. After marriage, a career change, and an automobile accident, Joan decided to fulfill her love of comedy by writing *Squashed*, while recuperating from the accident. She has written nine novels for teenagers, including *Hope Was Here*, which won a Newbery Honor. Her books have won numerous awards as well as the hearts of teens across the country. She lives in Brooklyn, NY, with her husband.

