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The Roles of Inquiry and Research in Hatching the Glorious Goddesses

Shirin Yim Bridges, with Janie Havemeyer and Gretchen Maurer

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What's better than asking an author about the different roles that inquiry and research play in the writing process? Asking three authors. Or in this case, three geese.

Janie Havemeyer, Gretchen Maurer, and Shirin Yim Bridges are all author-geese for the nonfiction press Goosebottom Books. (Bridges is also the Head Goose, or publisher.) This fall they are adding to Goosebottom's list with a brand new series: *A Treasury of Glorious Goddesses*. Havemeyer is the goose behind *Call Me Ixchel, Mayan Goddess of the Moon*. Maurer's title is *Call Me Isis, Egyptian Goddess of Magic*. Bridges wrote *Call Me Athena, Greek Goddess of Wisdom*.

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"I started out by embarking on a quest to become an expert on the ancient Maya," says Havemeyer. "That, of course, took extensive research: an immersion in the culture that would form the backbone of my story."

Maurer agrees. "I did most of my research in the beginning. I like to immerse myself in the subject before even thinking how the story might take shape. I learned about

the history, geography, religion, and cultural practices of the ancient Egyptians."

"It was a little different for me," says Bridges. "I've been a fan of Greek mythology since I was a kid, so I was able to quickly sketch out which myths I wanted to incorporate into my book. My first challenge was then not the research but the question: What was the story? Because I knew the mythology, I already had various plot points. But what could tie them all together and make them interesting and relatable to a young reader? So I started with inquiry."

Whether research or inquiry was the first step, all authors felt that the two went hand in hand.

“One example of research leading to inquiry that then fueled more research is my discovery of *pohatok*,” says Havemeyer. “After encountering stories in ancient sources of mortals playing this ball game with the demons of the Mayan underworld, I wanted to find out how *pohatok* was played. How important was it in the lives of the Mesoamerican people? These inquiries led to further research, and I found my answers in new and surprising places, like watching a reenactment of *pohatok* and examining Mayan works of art that depicted ballplayers and their equipment.”

“My research also led to inquiry,” says Maurer, “but not only about factual accuracies. For example, I learned that Isis’s husband Osiris ignored Isis once he was reincarnated in the Underworld. That got me thinking: How would Isis feel? How would she react to this snub? What would she do? So research led to inquiry and a deeper understanding of the fictional characters in my head.”

“Oh yes,” agrees Havemeyer, “One of the challenges of retelling Ixchel’s myth for a middle school audience is that her story involves domestic abuse, a delicate subject for any audience. Even though I didn’t want to show the physical abuse, I still wanted to develop a relationship that was authentic to the patterns and behaviors of domestic abuse, ultimately leading the reader to realize, alongside Ixchel, that her relationship with the Sun God was unhealthy.”

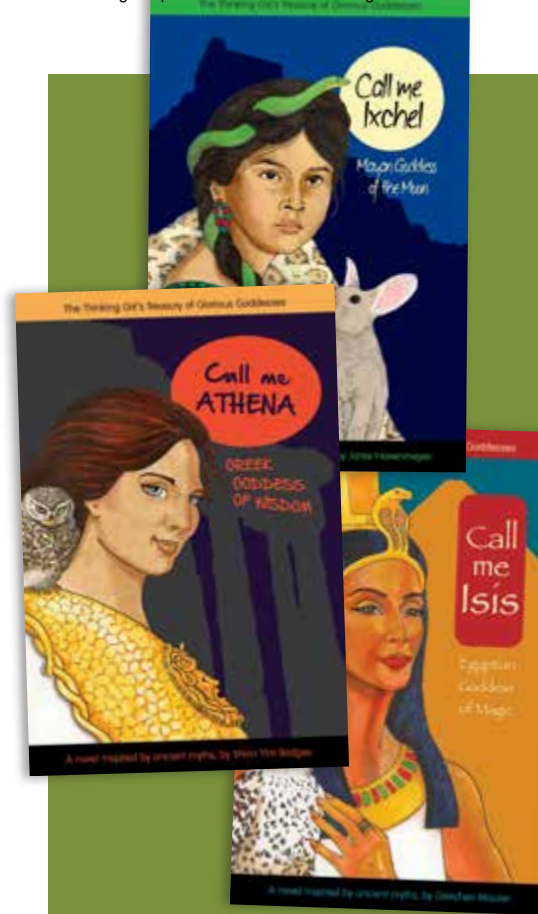
“How could I do this? What are some patterns that abusers use to control their partners? Is there a ‘personality type’ associated with this kind of scenario? These questions led me to learn more about domestic violence and to shape the character of K’inich Ajaw accordingly.”

“So in my case where inquiry came first,” says Bridges, “it led to research, and, ultimately, to a more accurate portrayal. Because of my One Big Question, I realized that Athena’s story is really a ‘new kid in school’ story. Athena arrives on Olympus to find the Olympian world already in full swing. She feels unsure of herself, out of place. That situation meant I had to write scenes that would show how imposing and isolating Olympus could feel. Inquiry led to research. What building materials would have been used? How would they have furnished and heated their rooms? In Athena’s bedroom, I had lined her walls with bookshelves until research revealed that no such thing existed. Of course not! In that era, the Greeks used scrolls, not books! So then I had to reline her walls with cubby holes to hold her scrolls instead.”

So how would these authors advise young writers to harness both research and inquiry?

“Research gives writers information they can use to add depth and richness to a story,” says Havemeyer. “When I found out what kind of fruit trees grew in Mesoamerica, I was able to create an orchard for Ixchel and K’inich Ajaw. Now not only do readers have a picture of what the couple’s backyard looked like but readers can also imagine what it might have smelled like and what types of meals might have ended up on the table. Research helped me to build a world.”

“Inquiry, on the other hand, is the force that drives the research. My tip to young writers is to write down a list of questions you need to answer to write your story. Be creative about the ways you search for your answers. Seeing movies, looking at art, asking questions of the experts are all avenues—in addition to reading



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“Research and inquiry create a feedback loop,” adds Maurer. “I’d urge young writers to ask questions, dive into research to answer those questions, note the new questions raised, chase down those answers

with more research. Then your brain will crackle with new information and ideas.”

“I agree that both inquiry and research are absolutely necessary,” says Bridges, “but I think that research skills are often taught whereas inquisitional skills are not.

Yet for the writer, inquiry is key. If research can help you create your context, only inquiry can flesh out your fictional characters. So my parting tip is to ask: Who is the character? What does this person want? What does he or she fear? And what, deep deep down, is his or her secret?”

Shirin Yim Bridges wrote *Ruby’s Wish* (*Chronicle Books* 2002), a *Publishers Weekly Best Children’s Book* and winner of the *Ezra Jack Keats Award*; *The Umbrella Queen* (*Greenwillow* 2008), a *TIME/CNN Top 10 Children’s Book*; and *Mary Wrightly, So Politely* (*Houghton Mifflin Harcourt* 2013), which earned starred reviews in *Kirkus*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Shelf Awareness*. She is also the *Head Goose* of *Goosebottom Books*, proud publishers of *The Thinking Girl’s Treasury of Dastardly Dames*, named a *Top 10 Nonfiction Series for Youth* by ALA; *The Thinking Girl’s Treasury of Real Princesses*, a medalist at the 2011 IPPY Awards; and *Horrible Hauntings*, an *IRA/CBC Children’s Choices* winner.



Gretchen Maurer is the *California Reading Association Eureka Medal-winning author of *Mary Tudor**:

“Bloody Mary” (2011) in *The Thinking Girl’s Treasury of Dastardly Dames*. Her writing has also been published in *Frances Mayes’s The Discovery of Poetry* (*Harcourt* 2001) and in the anthology *A Cup of Comfort for Mothers to Be* (*Adams Media* 2006). She cowrote the screenplay for *Alma*, a 2007 short film that has won multiple awards. She lives in northern California with her family.



Janie Havemeyer has worked as a museum educator at the *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, an elementary

school teacher in the *San Francisco Bay area*, a social studies curriculum designer, and a literacy tutor. She writes narrative nonfiction picture books for children and is busy thinking about the next eccentric character whose story she wants to tell. Janie is the author of *Catherine de’ Medici: “The Black Queen”* (2011) and *Njinga “The Warrior Queen”* (2012), both in *The Thinking Girl’s Treasury of Dastardly Dames*.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Knowledge Quest, Publication No. 483-860, is published five times per year by the American Association of School Librarian, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. Annual subscription price, \$50. Printed in U.S.A. with periodical class postage paid at (Illinois). As a nonprofit organization authorized to mail at special rates (DMM Section 424.12 only), the purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding twelve months.

EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

(“Average” figures denote the average number of copies printed each issue during the preceding twelve months; “actual” figures denote actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: September/October 2014 issue). Total number of copies printed average 8,381; actual 8,383. Sales through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: none. Mail subscription: actual 7,227. Free distribution actual 1,081. Total distribution average 8,381; actual 8,383. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing average 75; actual 104. Total: average/actual 8,381/8,383. Percentage paid: average 89.31; actual 86.98.