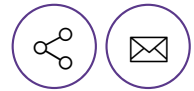


# Bruce Coville Interview Transcript



Grades

**PreK–  
K, 1–2,  
3–5, 6–  
8**

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**How did you first become interested in writing books for children?**

Well, it was partly because I didn't want to grow up. Also, during my first year in college, I started going out with a girl who lived around the corner from me. She was a fantastic artist. So I thought if

I wrote stories, she could make pictures for them. We're married now, and that's what we do!

### **How old were you when you began writing stories?**

The first time I thought I'd like to be a writer was when I was in sixth grade. But you change your mind when you're a kid. When I was 17, I decided that writing was definitely what I was going to do.

### **Where do you get your ideas?**

Ideas are all around you — everything gives you ideas. But the real source is the part of your brain that dreams. The most important thing is to be able to keep the ideas that the dreaming part of your brain sends you. I save the ideas when I get them — I have a folder called "IDEAS," and I have enough ideas for the next 15 years. So really, I don't have more ideas than anyone else.

### **Out of all your ideas, how do you decide which one to write about?**

That's very hard sometimes. Actually, often it's based on contracts — what I've agreed to write for different publishers. I know what I'm going to write for the next three years. It's frustrating, because if I get a good new idea, I have to put it aside.

### **What do you prefer to write, novels or short stories?**

I tend to be more of a novel writer. In fact, some of my novels started out as short stories, and I just got carried

away! I think some of my best writing is in the short story form, but novels come more naturally to me.

**If you didn't write for a living, what would you do?**

I used to be a teacher, so I'd probably go back to that. I loved teaching. I used to teach fourth grade. Or I might try to be an actor.

**Why did you stop teaching to become a writer?**

Teaching is the hardest job in the world. I loved doing it, but I couldn't write full time and teach full time, and I loved writing even more than I loved teaching.

**Which of your characters is most like you?**

Rod Allbright, the hero of *Aliens Ate My Homework*. He's actually based on me. It's the only time I've ever based a character specifically on myself. The pictures of him in the book are based on pictures of me when I was a kid.

**Who are some of your favorite authors?**

Lloyd Alexander, Natalie Babbitt, William Sleator, and Jane Yolen.

**What are some of your favorite children's books by other authors?**

The Chronicles of Prydain, by Lloyd Alexander. It's a five-book series. I think Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* is the best children's book in the last 50 years. I also like *The Golden Compass*, by Philip Pullman. The second book in that

series, *The Subtle Knife*, is also out now. And *A Barrel of Laughs, A Vale of Tears*, by Jules Feiffer.

**Why do you like to write science fiction?**

Because it's what I like to read! There's no point in writing something you don't want to read yourself. I'm always trying to write books that I myself would have wanted to read when I was a kid. My ideal audience is me when I was ten years old.

**Did you ever think any of your teachers were aliens?**

Oh, no, not really. I just thought that they were weird.

**Do you believe in aliens?**

Oh, absolutely. I don't actually believe that they are here right now monitoring us, but I absolutely believe that there is intelligent life on other planets.

**Would you like for one of your books to be made into a movie? Which one?**

Well, I'd like for one of my books to be made into a *good* movie. But the odds on that are pretty low! Most books are made into bad movies. Often, movie rights are bought on books, but sometimes the people who buy the rights don't actually get around to making the movie. I think my book *Goblins in the Castle* would make a great movie.

**Who is your favorite imaginary character?**

Of my own books, it's Igor from *Goblins in the Castle*. In general, it's Bilbo Baggins from *The Hobbit*, by J.R.R. Tolkien.

**Do you consider yourself a good author?**

Yes. If I didn't, I wouldn't inflict my stories on kids!

**What is your favorite book that you've written?**

That's like asking me which of my children I love the most! *Goblins in the Castle* was particularly fun to write, because the character Igor is based on my "half-mad twin brother, who I keep in the cellar, eats the cellar, and eats the house." He used to come terrorize my 4th grade classes when I was a teacher, and we had so much fun with him I put him in a book.

**Have you ever written a book about something other than space or dragons?**

Oh, yes. I've written nearly 70 books, and while most of them are sci-fi or fantasy, I've also done retellings of Shakespeare plays; I did a historical novel called *Fortune's Journey*; I wrote a nonfiction book about prehistoric people; and Jane Yolen and I just wrote a book called *Armageddon Summer*. It's about two kids whose parents think the world is going to end and drag them to the top of a mountain to meet the end of the world.

**We like the way you make the ends of the chapters so exciting that we want to keep reading. How do you**

### **do that so well?**

Sometimes, I write something that surprises me, just to make something scary happen, and I don't know what's going to happen next! Sometimes, I just go back and look over what I've written, and find the scariest spot, and make the chapter end right there. I do that because I know people tend to read to the end of a chapter, and when they close the book, you might not get them back unless you have them hooked.

### **How many children do you have, what are their names, and how old are they?**

I have three children: Orion, a 27-year-old boy; Cara, a 22-year-old girl; and Adam, my youngest, who is 16. Adam seems interested in writing right now.

### **Where do you do your writing? Do you have a studio?**

I have an office out of the house. It's a whole house that I bought for this purpose. I rent one room to another writer. My assistant works downstairs, and I have two rooms for all my projects.

### **Does your wife still illustrate your books?**

Yes. She's working right now on the illustrations for *Aliens Stole My Body*.

### **Has your wife illustrated any books that you didn't write? Which ones?**

She's illustrated probably a dozen books that I didn't write, including *Hob Goblin and the Skeleton*, by Alice

Schertle, and *Short and Shivery: Thirty Chilling Tales*, by Robert San Souci.

**What part of the writing process do you enjoy most?**

Now, I enjoy rewriting, actually. When I was younger, I liked writing the first draft of the story best. But now I like making the story better.

**Do you wish you could go back and change any of your books? If so, which one?**

Actually, I'm so fussy about my writing that sometimes when short stories are reprinted, I do change them. I rewrote eight novels when I had a chance to get them republished. That said, I like all my books, and there are none that I am unhappy about.

**Is the sequel to *Into the Land of the Unicorns* out yet?**

No, but it's written. It's called *The Song of the Wanderer*, and it tells about how Cara goes back to look for her grandmother. It's supposed to come out this fall.

**Are you working on a Magic Shop book now?**

No, the last Magic Shop book to come out was *The Skull of Truth*, and that came out last fall. I'm not scheduled to do another one right away. But I'll probably do another one. I keep coming back to the Magic Shop, because those are some of my best books.

**If you knew you could only publish one more book, what would it be about?**

It would be about life, death, truth, and beauty. And it would also be about 500 pages long.

**Where do you get your ideas for names for your characters?**

Some of them are the names of my friends that I fiddle around with. Some I just make up by playing with sounds. I also use a "Naming Dictionary" that people use when they're going to have a baby.

**How long does it take to write a book?**

Typically, about three months. But every book has its own rhythm. I once wrote a 200-page book in ten days. Notice I said once! It never happened again. And *The Skull of Truth* was four years overdue. I didn't work on it every day during those four years, of course. That's one reason why it's hard to answer that question. Sometimes you set a book aside and then come back to it. I'm usually working on more than one book at a time. But it's not hard to shift gears between them.

**Did you do well in school?**

Yes, I was quite a good student. My worst subject was not writing, but handwriting. Sometimes people forget that they are different things! I was also lousy at gym.

**What are your hobbies?**



I like going to movies, and going to the theater even more. I like musical theater. I also like walking outdoors.

**Do you have any pets? What are they?**

We have three cats - Ike, Thunder, and Princess Pozma Fuzzibutt. We also have a jet-propelled Norwegian elkhound named Thor.

**What's your favorite movie?**

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind.*

**Do people recognize you when you go out to theaters, restaurants, etc.?**

Actually, I always used to say no. I would say to kids, "Would you recognize me if you hadn't just met me?" And they would say no, because people don't usually know what writers look like. But in my city, my picture has been in the newspaper many times. And I've been on TV many times. So people here do recognize me and stop me. I live in Syracuse, NY.

**What awards have you won? Which are you most proud of?**

It's hard to list them all - I've won many state children's choice awards. And those are my favorites. If adults like me, that's fine. But I really write for kids, and their awards mean the most. I have won children's choice awards in about 15 or 16 states.

**What was your favorite book when you were growing up?**

I was growing up for a long time, and I'm still working on it! Since I was a kid for a long time, I had many different favorites over the years. I liked *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet*, by Eleanor Cameron; *The Black Stallion*, by Walter Farley; *Doctor Dolittle*, by Hugh Lofting; and *Penrod and Sam*, by Booth Tarkington.

**Do you get a chance to read for pleasure? Or are you writing books most of the time?**

I don't get to read nearly as much for fun as I would like. I love reading - it's one of my favorite things in the world. When I go on vacation in the summer, I take a big stack of books with me and just read and read and read.

**Are you working on a new book right now? If so, what is it called?**

Right now, I'm working on some short stories for a book of mine called *Odder Than Ever*. I'm also doing the rewrites on *Aliens Stole My Body*.

**Do you have any friends that write books?**

Most of my closest friends are writers. People like to hang out with people who do the same kind of work. Some of my best friends are Jane Yolen, Paula Danziger, and Ann M. Martin.

**Did you ever have a bully push you around?**

Yes, I think everyone gets bullied, which is one of the reasons I write about it a lot. I think kids like to read about that because they all experience it. Even

bullies get bullied. There's always someone that's bigger that can push you around. I get mad at schools because they sometimes say, when a kid is being bullied, "Oh, he'll just have to get used to it, because that's what life is like." But that's a lie. Adults do not go to work and get beat up on the job. And schools have a responsibility to protect children from bullies.

**Describe a typical day in your life. Do you spend time writing each day?**

I have no typical days. And I do not have a schedule. I am as likely to be getting up at four in the morning to start my day as I am to be going to bed at four in the morning because I stayed up late writing! I try to write every day, but many days I am on the road, visiting schools, or for other business reasons. My best days are the ones when I start writing first thing in the morning. I always do better then.

**Who or what inspires you to write your stories?**

Desperation. What inspires me is that it's my job, and I have to do it or I don't get paid! The other thing that inspires me is the kids. And I live in a constant state of fear that what I do won't be good enough for them. It's trying to make a book good enough for kids that keeps me going.

**How does it feel to be turned down by a publisher?**

I hate it! I call it getting the "ugly baby" letter. They call the letter they send you the rejection slip. It's like getting a letter that says, "Dear Mr. Coville, We have carefully examined photographs of your child, and boy do you have an ugly baby." The story is part of you, it's come from inside you, and when they say they don't want it, it hurts. But you can't let that stop you. Or you'll never get published.

### **What is the best way to motivate children to write well?**

Read aloud to them, and have them read. Reading good writing is the best motivation to have good writing of your own. Also, don't set artificial limits. I don't write for half an hour and wrap a story up. We don't give kids enough time to really carry on a project. Those who want to should keep going and become more invested.

### **What advice do you have for young writers?**

Write. The way you learn to write is by writing, not by circling answers or filling in the blanks. It's the best answer there is. You learn to write by writing. Second piece of advice: Read. Fill your brain full of words. And third piece of advice: Keep a journal. It's like a present from who you are to who you will be.



WRITING PROCESS (/CONTENT/TEACHERS/EN/SEARCH-RE

# Relat ed Subj ects



# Related Content

## LESSON PLAN

Watch  
David  
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Allgunky  
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Missing  
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## ARTICLE

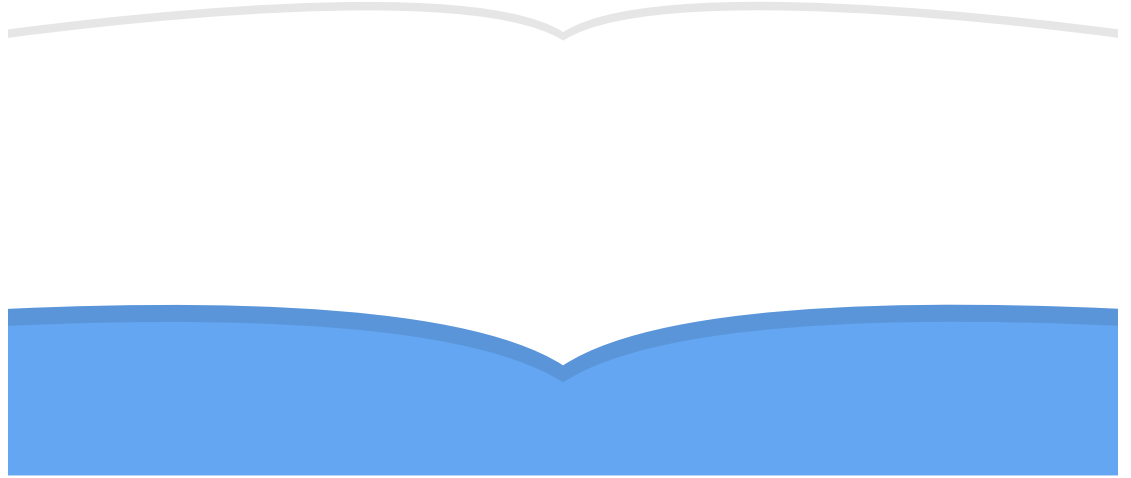
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## Can't Find What You're

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SEARCH



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