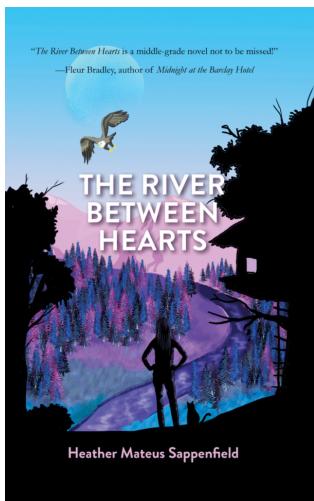




Tough Terrain: Why & How I Craft Story for Connection & Compassion, a guest post by Heather Mateus Sappenfield

January 14, 2022 by [Amanda MacGregor](#) [Leave a Comment](#)



“How then might storytelling earn its adaptive keep?” asks noted science writer Brian Greene in *Until the End of Time*. Exploring the evolution of sharing stories on a purely scientific level, he posits several theories. Among these, that story allows us to practice experiences prior to encountering them, aiding survival. Another theory states that story allows us to gather information about others (the roots of gossip), also facilitating survival. There’s certainly been proof of late that reading fiction generates empathy, and the more literary and realistic the narrative, the more empathy it generates. And empathy leads to understanding, compassion, even kindness. As an author, my instinct (and hope) is that reading stories offers a blend of these elements, so I craft my narratives toward this end.



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Younger readers, with their agile minds, are primed for these experiences as they decipher and define their worlds and their roles within them. Adults frequently try to shield kids from life's difficulties. But here's the rub: Kids usually hear about them anyway, through snippets of adult conversation, the media, or interactions among peers. Often these moments comprise their first, impressionable experiences with challenging topics, shaping the adults they become. **By reading books that explore difficult issues, kids have the opportunity to learn about, experience vicariously, and practice mentally, these hard subjects in nurturing ways, preparing them for positive encounters later in life.** Young Adult and especially Middle Grade books are often dismissed as simple, yet they are vital seeds for fertile minds. **With *The River Between Hearts*, I learned that writing a MG novel that explores tough terrain is no easy task.**

The paradox of writing for younger readers, especially with first-person narration, is that...well...I'm older. Much older. So before I could begin writing this book, I spent over a year getting to know my protagonist, almost-eleven-year-old Rill, and her friend Perla. Along the way, I hung out with live kids their age, listening, observing, and noticing, especially what I *didn't* hear or see. Frequently in MG books, the protagonist has special powers or is highly intelligent, a genius even, and quite mature, and the story revolves around these special attributes solving the riddles of the world. *I love, love* books like this, yet because my book would explore difficult topics occurring in our world today and because I hoped to generate the most empathy, I wanted the characters to seem *real*.

For example, kids, a lot of teens and, yes, many adults, don't discuss their emotions. Usually they don't even fully understand them. So if they do encounter them, it's through physical sensations or actions. This lack of self-awareness became the major conflict for Rill as she dealt with the loss of her dad. **Once I realized this, I knew she'd be an unreliable narrator. Not by design, but by unconscious denial.** This realization lifted the lid on a marvelous tool kit.



Silhouette at sunset, licensed via Shutterstock

With Rill in denial, I could write about grief in a nuanced way, providing clues for the reader that are revealed via her naïve actions and revelations. Mistakes were imperative, they're how we learn, so Rill makes many—in her speech, her actions, her relationships. Stuck in denial, bad at school and words, Rill becomes an unintimidating guide for readers who understand more than she does. When she barrels toward a mistake, the reader knows better, and this creates suspense. By keeping Rill's vocabulary and intellect realistic and by having her discover things through action rather than a special gift, I could draw upon her senses, inviting the reader in physically, and *this* sets the stage for deeper empathy. **As with the real world, the story offers no simple answers; tidiness would have fractured its integrity. My hope is that upon this unintimidating footing, readers can then explore immigration and grief and their consequences for kids as kids would realistically view and experience them.** Ironically, I've had the pleasure of glowing reviews from older teens and adults, who, because of this realism, are able to read the story with nostalgia.

All this took about five years of revising and tweaking and revising. Of checking with a lower school director to clarify that fourth-graders would use the word “lady” not “women;” of catching and eradicating the darned moments when my adult perspective or flowery language had crept in; of working with former immigrant students to get the details true. And herein lies a contradictory yet delicate aspect of craft: While the narrative remained honest in voice and action, it needed to be subtly guided by a nurturing, reassuring meta-narrator. This was the hardest part, instilled through sentence and story structures, consistent chapter length and the occasional subtle word. **My hope is that *The River Between Hearts* creates safe, realistic terrain for Rill and Perla to learn, grow and adapt, and for younger readers (and readers of all ages) to learn, grow, and adapt with them.**

Amanda MacGregor works in an elementary library, loves dogs, and can be found on Twitter @CiteSomething.

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