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Q & A with E. Lockhart, Sarah Mlynowski and Lauren Myracle

By Alexis Burling, *Children's Bookshelf* -- Publishers Weekly, 4/3/2008

When planning my interview with E. Lockhart, Sarah Mlynowski and Lauren Myracle—the three authors of the new collaborative novel, *How to Be Bad* (HarperTeen, May)—I was a little befuddled at first. Would I talk to them each individually on the phone? Would we all be on a conference call and talk over each other like a pack of giddy friends in a school cafeteria? And then it came to me. I would conduct the interview in the same way they had written the novel—by giving them the opportunity to send the questions back and forth to each other over email in a round-robin conversation. When I got the interview back, I felt as though they had actually been in the room with me the whole time. In fact, I kind of wish they had been.

So, *How to Be Bad* came to be because of a note Lauren posted on a MySpace teen list group, right?

Lauren Myracle: Yes! It was on Sarah's **teenlit group**. She had asked "What's everybody reading these days?" Emily wrote back and mentioned that she'd just finished the wonderful *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist* by David Levithan and Rachel Cohn. My reply: "That one's in my stack—I can't wait to read it. In fact, I really want to *write* a collaborative novel one day." Then Emily wrote, "Lauren—any time, baby. Just say the word." (I'm still amazed by that, by the way... that she'd be so eager, willing and excited.)

Sarah Mlynowski: I knew I wanted in. I e-mailed Emily suggesting that we round up a few writers to write something collaborative.... I was thinking six authors writing interconnected stories about a group of teens.

E. Lockhart: I wrote back that I was all over the idea, but um. Six writers? Kind of a lot.

L.M.: Yes, she was crazy. Or rather... she *is* crazy. (Love you, Sarah!) Sarah thinks VERY BIG.

E.L.: Sarah and I decided three would be much easier to handle—the two of us, and, hopefully, Lauren.

S.M.: We weren't sure if Lauren would really do it, since she's an über-famous *New York Times* bestselling author and all.

L.M.: Yeah, whatever, ya goofs! When I found out that Sarah *plus* E. were in... I was over the moon.

With all of the plotlines the three of you could have picked when you put your heads together, what inspired you to write a novel about three girls on a road trip? What were some of the ideas you threw out?

S.M.: There was lots of talk about teenage fairies at the beginning—fairies and angels. I wasn't into either of those ideas.

L.M.: I suggested we write about an elite team of three teenage angels to pose as "real" girls in a sin-ridden high school... that's when I suggested the *How to Be Bad* title.

E.L.: I put the kibosh on angels, though.

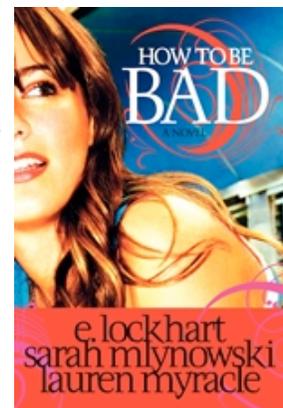
L.M.: You said you were "too religiously tangled" to write about angels. I loved that line.

E.L.: I can't remember!

S.M.: Ha! Focus, ladies!



Clockwise from top: Myracle, Lockhart, Mlynowski. Photo: Heather Weston.



L.M.: Yes, ma'am!

S.M.: As I recall, Lauren then suggested that we write about three friends who were tired of always following the rules, being predictable and responsible—a book about girls who break out of the mold.

L.M.: Girls that take off on an adventure, playing hooky from life.

Given that it was three of you writing one book... how did you decide who would write which chapters? Did you all pick a character and go from there? And how did you decide who would write the first chapter that would set the stage for the rest of the book... by drawing straws?

E.L.: Lauren volunteered to write the first chapter. I think beginnings are hard, so I was glad to let her. Before she did that, though, we each wrote out a couple paragraphs of character description so she had something to go on.

After you had written 90 pages and sold the manuscript to HarperCollins, you decided to meet up in Orlando on a wild adventure of your own, yes? Given that you had never met in person before, were you nervous?

E.L.: I wasn't nervous because I had already met everyone—Sarah and Lauren were the ones who hadn't met. They must have known they'd love each other, though, because they planned to share a room! I slept alone because I have an early bedtime and get cranky.

S.M.: I wasn't nervous at all. I had read Lauren's books and assumed she'd be as sweet as her characters.

L.M.: I *am* as sweet as my characters. But I was nervous, because I'm also a huge dorky, awkward, nervous person. But with Sarah and E., we were hot-tubbing and giggling right away.

Now, be honest: what were your first impressions of each other? Did they match your expectations?

S.M.: They were as smart, fun and awesome as I thought they'd be. But if you want to know the truth, I had expected Lauren to be a goody-goody, and Emily to be a badass. I was *not* expecting Lauren to have a tattoo. I was *not* expecting Emily to fall asleep at nine.

E.L.: I get up really, really early!

L.M.: Hmm. Honesty, eh? I was a little intimidated at the prospect of hanging with E., just because she is so brilliant and witty and gorgeous. And I still have fears of not being "cool enough," which is ridiculous, I know. (Then again, maybe this is why I write for teens?) I'd never met Sarah, but I knew from her emails that she was *bubbly*, and so I pretty much expected what I got: bubbly Sarah (who is *also* brilliant and witty and gorgeous, just for the record). Anyway, it turns out that I didn't need to be scared of E. either—she was warm, kind, goofy, and not intimidating at all. And... she even has her own E. weirdnesses—like an irrational fear of tollbooths!

E.L.: A *charming* irrational fear of tollbooths.

Let's get back to the book. After your road trip, did your writing processes change, now that you had met each other in person?

S.M.: Writing the first half of the novel was all about throwing each other curve balls. Lauren threw Emily an alligator. Emily threw me a hot guy. I threw Lauren a hurricane. When we met up, we outlined the second half of the book. That made the writing process less about surprising each other and more about making sure the story worked as a cohesive whole.

L.M.: The second half of the novel was all about getting inside our characters and figuring out what their personal arcs and issues were. This was definitely jumpstarted by meeting each other and learning a bit about *each other's* arcs and issues.

S.M.: Hey, now! Who says we have issues? You and E., maybe...

E.L.: Ahem! Sarah, I've noticed that you are the only one who refused to do interpretive dance on the *How to Be Bad* videotape. Why is that?

S.M.: Um, next question?

As you know, each writer has his or her own vision of his/her characters, dialogue, how he/she wants the plot to develop, and so on. Given that, how did you deal with any conflicts in vision that arose?

L.M.: Our policy was that whoever's chapter it was—and by that, I mean whoever wrote the first draft of that chapter—got to lead the way. But we all had full and complete authority to change our own character's dialogue in chapters written by other people.

E.L.: Plot is very hard for me to control and manage, so I was very grateful to work with two writers who are really good at it! No conflict there.

However, there was some bloodshed over the title.

S.M.: There was also bloodshed over the playlist. Emily kept using songs from 1952.

E.L.: Kids these days! All their music sounds like noise. (Kidding! Sort of.)

L.M.: I shed no blood. I am very peaceful.

S.M.: LOL. Don't let her fool you! Under that sweetness, Lauren is a tough chick who will not be pushed around. Emily's pretty tough, too. I often had to be the swing vote, just like Mel.

How to Be Bad is about three girls—Jesse, Vicks, and Mel—who have larger than life personalities. Did you model your character after yourself or someone you know?

S.M.: Mel is a combo of me and a friend from high school.

E.L.: I am a narcissist, I guess. All my protagonists are me.

L.M.: My girl, who is a Bible-thumping trailer dweller with angel decals on her fingernails, is modeled on E. Ha! Just kidding. Jesse, like E., is religiously tangled up... but in a very different way than E.

So many nutty things happen throughout How to Be Bad. The Vicks-and-Marco-in-the-pool fiasco. Mel and Vicks's brawl in the Jolly Roger. Jesse's near-death experience trying to save a baby duck from the jaws of an alligator. If each of you had to pick a favorite chapter or scene, what would it be and why?

E.L.: The part where Mel gets drunk on wine coolers. Sarah wrote it. It's hysterically funny, but the reader can identify with Mel letting her id out, while at the same time, cringing for the regret she's going to feel in the morning.

S.M.: One of my favorite scenes is the, um, flatulence scene. Lauren wrote it because it was originally in Jesse's perspective, but Farrin Jacobs, our editor, asked me to retell it from Mel's. I basically got to steal all of Lauren's great lines.

L.M.: Actually, Sarah cringed a bit when the farting scene first showed up on our passed-around draft. Then it ended up as hers! (Ironic and delightful justice.) I think my true favorite scene takes place in the pirate-themed hotel, where our three bickering girls end up falling asleep on one bed and snuggling like puppies.

How different were your experiences growing up from Jesse's, Vicks's, and Mel's?

E.L.: The part of Vicks that I identify with is having a long-distance love relationship where everything has gone weird... how heartbreaking and destabilizing that is. Everything else I made up.

S.M.: Like Mel, I grew up very concerned about fitting in. But I'm much louder and bossier than she is.

L.M.: Jesse is... Jesse. I am not Jesse. But I'm pretty hardcore when it comes to spirituality, I guess, in that it's awfully important to me. And apparently—ahem—I sometimes come across as a goody-goody, which Jesse most definitely is. (Sarah—why did you think I'd be a goody-goody???)

I hear you are also planning another road trip for your book tour. Is that true?

S.M.: Absolutely. We're driving from Atlanta to Miami.

L.M.: (*whoops and circles fist in air*): Road trip, baby!

E.L.: They're not letting me drive.

S.M.: Or go through tollbooths.

L.M.: Actually, we might do both, just for the entertainment value....

Would you ever consider doing a project like this again?

S.M.: If Lauren and Emily are involved... a hundred percent.

L.M.: Ditto.

E.L.: Of course. Lauren just owes six books, Sarah owes four, and I owe two. After that, we're on it.

What's next for each of you?

E.L.: *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* came out in March. Up in fall '09 is what I'm currently calling *Roo3*, the third book about Ruby Oliver, heroine of *The Boyfriend List* and *The Boy Book*.

S.M.: I just finished *Parties & Potions*, the fourth Magic in Manhattan book. Now I'm writing *Gimme a Call*, about a 14-year-old high school freshman who calls her 18-year-old self.

L.M.: Coming out next fall is *Bliss*, a story of a friendship gone very, very wrong. (On the cover, the title is written in blood! Too cool. It's really chocolate sauce Photoshopped to look red, but still!)

And finally, if I may take a quote from *How to Be Bad...* “Cause maybe, sometimes, a girl's gotta be bad in order to figure out how to be good.” What does this mean to each of you?

E.L.: As you grow up, find your own rules to live by—the ones that make you feel good about yourself and your position in the world. Sometimes that means breaking other people's rules—or challenging them—but so be it.

S.M.: You have to push yourself out of your comfort zone to find out who you really are, and what makes you happy.

L.M.: And to me, it means, “Ha ha! I got to end the book with a line that I knew from the beginning I wanted to use!” I probably get a little too much pleasure out of that.

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