

Contributor's Corner

Vol. 3 Issue 9, "20/20"

# LAUREN HARKAWIK

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**Tell us a little bit about yourself.**

**Lauren Harkawik:** Sure! I grew up in the suburbs of Albany, NY. I studied dramatic writing at Purchase College in Westchester, where I was immersed in a community of artists and imagination-lovers like me. Purchase is where I met some of my best friends and my husband, Garret Harkawik, who's a documentary filmmaker. Garret and I lived in LA and then New York City before deciding, kind of on a whim, to give rural Vermont a try. I don't like to say we were *escaping*, per se, because we loved New York and it offered us a lot by way of personal growth and culture. It was more like we were pulled toward Vermont (what's that saying? "The mountains are calling and she must go?"). We were seeking creative air. I started working as a freelance writer, Garret as a freelance filmmaker. We were

making our own schedules and had all the time in the world. Now we have a four-year-old, and our time is less bottomless. I also started working as a freelance reporter for my local newspaper, which has opened up a lot of new worlds for me in terms of getting to know my town and the people in it and using my communication skills in new ways.

**Where did *Joey Button* originate? What was your creative process when you were writing this?**

**LH:** I was doing some freewriting one day and the image of a little boy running into a monster in the woods, and then telling his parents about it, came into my mind. I started a draft then—this was about three years ago—and I had thoughts that it should be a long adventure tale, with Joey Button going into the woods with his pals to find

the Big Thing. But I was never quite sure where it should go, and I kept putting off working on it.

But the monster kept popping back into my imagination. Fast forward, and I found myself another couple of years into adulthood. I was deep into some really intensive thinking about my identity as an artist. When I was in college, I was constantly engaged in the creative energy of my own muse. As an adult, it's hard to hold onto that. Art versus "real life" is a tension I've struggled with myself, and I've also seen my friends and husband struggle with it in their own ways. It's like we're all trying to get a glimpse of our own elusive Big Things. As someone who works for a living and is raising a little kid, I'm constantly chasing moments of artistic fulfillment. It examining that, versus my art life as a student, the

lead to the idea of Joey Button/Joseph Williams losing sight of (and then eventually rediscovering) his Big Thing. And that coalesced into what the story is today.

When I sat down to write “Joey Button” in its current form, the scene of post-retirement Joseph rediscovering the Big Thing and then breaking out in laughter really anchored me. It was inspired by the laugh of a close friend of mine, the stop-motion animator Evan Curtis. When he finds something funny, he bursts into this incredible laughter that just breaks through whatever clouds are hanging over your head and forces you to laugh with him. It’s like he’s overcome with joy and then you are too. It’s different but equally powerful to the feeling I get when I’m really onto something creatively—all I can focus on is the creative momentum, and I’m dancing in my seat from the joy of it. Joseph Williams seeing the Big Thing again is his version of that feeling. Evan’s laugh was playing in my mind as I wrote that last scene.

There’s a used bookstore I love to write in—it’s in a big old gristmill on a cliff that overlooks a waterfall. It has desks throughout it and a great little cafe. It’s like a writer’s dream—there’s books and nature and natural light and this amazing energy stored in the dust of every corner of the place. Once I’d figured out how I was going to tell this story, I went there one morning with the intention of writing Joey Button. The air was just right and it poured out of me in one sitting. And when I got to the laugh, I felt this great catharsis. This piece had been on my mind for years, all while I was struggling to stay in touch with my own muse as adulthood was invading my space. When Joey Button saw the Big Thing again, I kind of felt like I had, too.

### **If you had a five-word message to Joey Button, what would it be?**

LH: Keep looking, you’ll find it.

### **Who were your early influences?**

LH: Roald Dahl is who inspired me to become a lifelong reader and a writer. In second grade, my teacher read us “The BFG” and “The Witches.” “The BFG” was

the most creative thing I’d ever heard. The way Dahl plays with language in that book is just unparalleled. And then there’s a line in “The Witches” that floored me. I still think about the experience of hearing it for the first time. The narrator is describing who might be a witch, and says:

“She might even be your lovely school-teacher who is reading these words to you at this very moment. Look carefully at that teacher. Perhaps she is smiling at the absurdity of such a suggestion. Don’t let that put you off. It could be part of cleverness.”

Reading it, my teacher smirked perfectly. It was like a deadpan smirk. My class gasped, and I remember actually getting goosebumps and then tears in my eyes as I realized what a reaction she—coupled with Dahl’s writing—had elicited from me and my classmates.

Dahl deals with magic a lot, but what really tickles me about his writing is the way he conjures new ways to look at every day things—like my teacher, for example. Sure, she wasn’t a witch (I think), but she still showed us a new side of herself that day, and I always saw her differently after that. Even amid the magic, Dahl’s writing is grounded in reality in a way that is so tied to the day-to-day human experience, and as soon as I was introduced to it, it made me see things in a different way. That’s something that I’m always chasing when I’m reading—what is this piece of writing going to make me see in a way that I didn’t see it before? And it’s something I’m always trying to create in my writing, too.

### **Does being a reporter play a big part in your writing style?**

LH: This is such a great question! I hadn’t thought about this, but yes, it 100% does. Reporting has taught me to witness things—a town board meeting, a day at a dairy farm, a hearing—break the experience down to its details, and turn them into a story. I’m always asking myself: who said what, what did it mean, and how does all of that relate to the bigger picture? I think taking that narrative approach to “normal people”—aka the people in my community—has gotten into the fiber of

my writing in subtle ways. I find myself tapping into details that feel like they’re asides but are amusing and poignant to me. For example, when Joey Button sits idly when he first sees the Big Thing, and a series of people walk by. They don’t ultimately come back or play big roles in the story, but they create the tapestry of his reality of that memory. I find the same thing when I’m reporting. Sometimes the story is one big headline, but a lot of times, the story is a tapestry of details that capture the mood of an event, or the thinking of a particular group of people in a particular moment in time.

### **What is one memory from your childhood you’ve always wanted to share to the world?**

LH: For me it’s not so much a memory of a singular event as it is a series of sounds, sights, and feelings. And it’s things that might seem mundane. Like, after school, my brother and I used to lay on the floor in our living room and watch “Batman: The Animated Series” while our mom cooked dinner. For all intents and purposes it was ho-hum. But the feelings that are wrapped around that memory are huge. They’re what life is made of. I’ve never felt so content or comfortable; it was this bottomless feeling of safety. And of course, I totally took it for granted. There’s a lot we don’t realize we’re experiencing as children: that comfort, but also wonder; fear; fearlessness; invincibility; curiosity. They’re these deep, huge feelings that we don’t even realize we’re having, and that I really celebrate now that I have the perspective to see how special (and fleeting) they were.

### **Would the eight-year-old Lauren be happy to meet the today-year-old Lauren?**

LH: I hope she would! I hope she’d be heartened to see that I’m still up for laughter and fun, and I hope she’d be heartened to know that everything turned out great. I have a family I love, a great little dog, a house on a hill, and time for writing. I can’t really ask for more, and I’d like to think she wouldn’t, either. ■