

An Interview with Author Lois Lowry

Newbery Medalist and *New York Times* best-selling author Lois Lowry has written more than 40 books for children and young adults, including *Number the Stars*, *The Giver*, and the *Anastasia Krupnik* series. In *The Windeby Puzzle*, her latest novel for middle grade readers, Lowry transports readers to an Iron Age world through the suspenseful dual narrative of a boy and girl both battling to survive. In an utterly one-of-a-kind blend of fiction and history, a master storyteller explores the mystery and life of the 2,000-year-old Windeby bog body.

You interweave the stories of *Estrild*, *Varick*, and your own creative journey. The result is a book that feels naturalistic and inviting. What led you to this innovative structure?

It's odd, isn't it, to go back and forth between me and the fictional characters? But I needed to tell the reader what the origin of the fiction was, and that there was truth embedded in it. I know from my mail that readers are actually interested in how a story comes into being. "How do you get your ideas?" is the question all writers hear most often. So I decided to answer it in this book, and the answer is, actually, a story begins when the writer wonders about something, then invites the reader to wonder as well. I wanted to show the process by which that happens.



Photo by Matt McKee

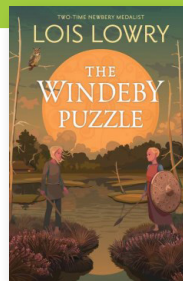
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The story includes period details, like rituals and clothing, and beyond that, inhabiting the mindset of the Iron Age people. Notably, you revised the manuscript to remove references to days/weeks/months, as they would have lived without calendars. The story also has a plot twist that you, the author, did not see coming – namely the discovery of the Windeby Child being a boy instead of a girl. With all these elements – history, imagination, surprise – was there a part of the writing that you especially enjoyed?

Let me set the scene a bit. It was spring of 2020. My spouse, Howard, was hospitalized with COVID for 10 weeks, and I was not allowed to visit. I've always been a reader but during that period of frightening isolation I read more than usual, sometimes things I might not have ordinarily encountered. Suddenly I happened on a mention of the body found in Germany in 1952. I started wondering. I started imagining. I started writing. I started researching. The most orderly way to go about it would have been to do the research first. But I couldn't go to libraries (2020, COVID, remember?) so I simply let my imagination take over and combed through the internet to find what I could. I created the character and began the story. Doing it that way meant a lot of stumbles, moments of "Oops!" and having to rewrite things that I later realized I had gotten wrong. But it was exhilarating, no question, and it kept my mind off the problems that surrounded me. Howard recovered, eventually, and he actually helped me write one scene... more about that in a minute.

There are two focuses between Estrild and Varick's stories. Estrild is focused on breaking out of the roles expected of her and Varick on the idea of doing one brave thing before you die. What led you to frame their stories around these ideas?

I was grappling with the initial mystery: the why of the body in the bog. But a story needs more than just a "Oh, that's it" moment. It needs a pervasive theme, a reason for the retelling. I would never know – no one would – what had actually happened to that young



The Windeby Puzzle

Lois Lowry • HarperCollins Publishers
2023 • MS

Estrild is not like the other girls in her village. She wants to be a warrior. Varick, the orphan boy who helps her train in spite of his twisted back, also stands apart. In a world where differences are poorly tolerated, just how much danger are they in? Inspired by the true discovery of the 2,000-year-old Windeby bog body in Northern Germany, Newbery Medalist and master storyteller Lois Lowry transports readers to an Iron Age world as she breathes life back into the Windeby child, left in the bog to drown with a woolen blindfold over its eyes.

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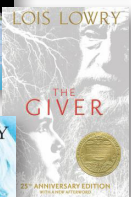
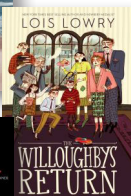
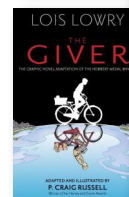
person 2,000 years ago. So I had to create an answer to that question. But more importantly: I had to tell a story (two stories, as it turned out) that would have some redemptive quality. I wanted to show that those two lives had value, that they mattered. And in these two stories, these two doomed adolescents moved history a tiny notch forward.

Was there any scene or moment that you particularly enjoyed writing, or that is your personal favorite?

I mentioned that Howard, while he was recovering, helped me write a scene. Howard is a retired physician, and every year I listen to him speak to the graduating class at Harvard Medical School about the history and nobility of the profession, how the most important task in medicine is to care about and for the patient. It was he who described to me how the fictional Iron Age boy, Varick, must brace himself and with great effort tug the femur – down, up, in – in order to maneuver the blacksmith’s dislocated hip back into the socket. Howard pointed out that of course today’s patient would be anesthetized. So we gave the iron forger a whole lot of ale to drink, and willow bark to chew on. (Still, I winced, writing the scene.)

Was there any way that the experience of writing this work was different from writing your past novels?

I’ve written so many different kinds of books. But I think they all, essentially, do the same thing – or try to. They invite the reader in as a participant. I want the reader to enter the consciousness of the protagonist, to feel and understand that person’s world and those circumstances, to worry and tremble and rejoice and triumph, and to emerge changed in some essential way. *The Windeby Puzzle* was no different, though perhaps we – writer and reader both – had to make some larger-than-usual leaps of imagination.



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 **HarperCollins Publishers**