

A Q&A With Melissa Hart

ENGAGING YOUNG READERS, WRITERS, AND NATURE LOVERS



Q: What led you to write *Avenging the Owl*?

A: I'd been volunteering for a while at our local raptor rehabilitation and nature center, when a young man came in to do mandatory high school community service. He didn't like birds—he was afraid of them, in fact—but he'd put off signing up for his community service hours until all the other opportunities around town had filled.

When he got to our raptor center, he was bitter and resentful and terrified. But over the course of the summer, as he learned to care for injured and orphaned owls and hawks and eagles, he relaxed and became engaged in their well-being . . . even excited to work with them. I got to thinking about what it would have been like if he'd had to do enforced community service, like some of our adult volunteers, because of a run-in with the law. I wanted to explore the idea of nature-immersion as rehabilitation for humans.

Q: Why did you include a character with Down syndrome?

A: My younger brother is a man with Down syndrome. We were really close growing up; we loved to play guitar and sing together, and go to the park and watch old movies. In my 20s, I worked as a teacher and group home counselor with children and adults who had Down syndrome. They're all around us, doing amazing things, and I think they deserve fair and accurate representation in our literature.

For instance, two young women with Down syndrome--Jamie Brewer and Madeline Stuart--have walked the runway at New York Fashion Week. Katie Apostolides graduated from college several years ago. People with Down syndrome are football players, singers, actors. My brother himself appeared in a national cell phone commercial.

Q: How old were you when you first began to publish your writing?

A: I was fifteen when *Cat Fancy* published two of my poems. They paid me \$10 for each. A few months later, I sold a short story to *Scholastic Voice*, one of those magazines that kids in public schools receive. I wrote for a couple of regional newspapers in high school, and for our high school yearbook, then took some time off in college to study opera. Trust me—we're all glad I returned to writing. Recently, I wrote an article on magazines that publish young writers. You can find it right here:

http://www.melissahart.com/uploads/WRT_0115_Headstart_Feature_Melissa_Hart_1_.pdf

Q: How often do you write, and where?

A: Jonathan and I have a tiny studio in our backyard under the oaks and cherry trees. I wake up two hours before my daughter, Maia, and stumble out half-asleep and get immediately to work. Often, my fluffy brown cat Jake will come and sit on my lap. I write almost every day for at least two hours, but often, I'll write more. I've gotten really good at being able to concentrate on essays and novel chapters at coffeehouses when I'm waiting for Maia to finish gymnastics or dance classes.

Q: Why did you dedicate *Avenging the Owl* to “Maia, who loves the earth”?

A: Ever since my husband and I adopted Maia at 19 months old, she's been crazy about nature. Right away, we took her backpacking and swam in a freezing mountain stream. She's hiked dozens of trails all over Oregon, camped all over, and she knows all the cool trivia that intrigues Solo and Eric—the best lichen to use for toilet paper in the woods, what you can find in an owl pellet, and where to look for banana slugs and bullfrogs. She loves to kayak and stomp around in the rain. I definitely had her in mind when I created Solo's eventual love of the outdoors in Oregon.

Q: What was it like to work up close and personal with birds of prey for 8 years?

A: There's nothing else like it. You have to be so mindful, so careful of every one of your movements and actions, so that you don't spook the bird. At the same time, you've got to be cognizant of their sharp parts—beaks and talons—so that you don't get accidentally injured. I loved being in the moment, every moment that I worked closely with the raptors. I loved learning about them—how to tube-feed them electrolytes after they came to us emaciated, how to hand-feed baby owls and hawk with forceps, how to hold great horned owls and red tailed hawks while staff gave them medical treatment.

Q: Can kids volunteer to work with birds of prey?

A: Different raptor and wildlife centers have different age requirements. Some allow you to volunteer with a parent after you turn 10 or 12, but you can't go into the mews. Others require you to be 18. These centers exist all across the country; you can look for them online and contact their education directors to ask whether they might be able to use your skills. Younger students can still volunteer in a variety of ways; they can clean and organize a center's gift shop, prepare newsletters for mailing, build perches, and—in the case of our local center, anyway--hold birthday parties at the center and ask for donations to the birds, instead of presents.

Q: You're working on another book for teens now. Is it a sequel to *Avenging the Owl*?

A: It isn't a sequel, but Solo and Eric do make a brief appearance. The novel is set in Costa Rica—it's about a girl surfer who meets a troubled boy in an abandoned hotel and ends up on the hunt for her missing mother during the famous sea turtle migration.

For more information, please [e-mail Melissa Hart](#).