

KIDS

Kids lean in to the Zoom room

BY ESTELLE LAURE

CREATIVE WRITING is, as so many great authors have said in one way or another, an exercise in finding out what we think about the world around us, exploring internal complexities and bringing them from the abstract and into something tangible that invites reflection, revision and expansion. It's also an invitation to infinite possibilities.

Creative writing is basically the opposite of what's happening right now – all of us caught behind our screens,

AT HOME WITH TWIRL

and Friends

straining our eyes and our patience. As an educator this is the most challenging moment since we first shut down. The scramble is over, we've adapted to distance learning, and some of our initial terror responses have settled as we've found we can, indeed, form and maintain relationships with our students even without sharing physical space.

We still all care for each other and our community is strong. In Taos, I haven't found angry parents or bitter students. I've found adaptability and willingness and that's been a beautiful thing.

But also ...

Everyone's tired. Everyone's always tired in November. It's a slog to power through classes from August until Thanksgiving without any meaningful break, with grades continually looming. So much of the experience of childhood is restricted at the moment I thought no one would want to go to another Zoom meeting, attend another "class." As curator of the SOMOS Young Writers Program, I seriously considered just pausing the whole thing until this mess is cleaned up. I'm so glad I didn't.

Kids have been showing up. They've been Zooming from restaurants, cars, other states, with bad internet connections – whatever – but they attend and even better, they lean in. A sort of ecstatic energy permeates the Zoom room. It isn't dry at all, even with the screens, because of what the mind can do, and because for some kids there's nothing better than the smell of paper, the feel of a pen scratching across the clean surface of a page.

For them, writing creatively is a



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These days we can't gather around the table to share stories, but storytelling is still a way to connect with one another.

portal and a bridge. Every writer knows it's a special thing to be alone with all that could happen, but it is also a great gift to have other humans listen and respond to your words. Now, in a time when kids may sometimes feel the whole world is dumpster juice, stepping into the imagination through writing is the way out through the inside.

SOMOS is one place to be. The Young Writers Salon features a different guest artist each month and focuses on playing in a totally supportive environment. One class may be poetry while the other is a free write. People are given time and space to share, and for me the most magical moments are those when I look up at my screen and every head is down, every pen moving with purpose. Sometimes, there are even smiles and laughter. It's joyful.

Coming up this month, we'll be partnering with Twirl to contribute to their Masked Gathering project. Young writers will be coming together to explore the various ways in which we

mask ourselves (because it's not just with our actual masks) and how they feel about the current situation. Words will be paired with visual art and dance to create a full and gorgeous expression of what this all is, what it is to be a child in 2020. Class is open for sixth to 12th grade and this month will take place Thursday (Nov. 12) and Thursday (Nov. 19), from 4:15-5:10 p.m.. Check the SOMOS site for Zoom info.

If SOMOS isn't for your child but you still want to play with writing, here's something you can do in a Zoom.

Open the chat and ask them each to list one household item, one piece of jewelry, one element, one place in nature and one magical creature. Then tell them to write down the list of the person above them in the chat, the bottom grabbing the top to loop around.

The household item is the portal to another world (this is fun when it's absurd like a potato masher or something); the jewelry is the talisman that will protect them in the other world;

it will control whatever the element is; the place in nature will be where they land in the other world; and the magical creature will be the friend who helps the character get through the adventure.

This is one of the best exercises to lubricate the brain, stretch into those static spaces and unfurl into play, because that's what we all need right now. More play!

Estelle Laure is the author of critically-acclaimed books for young people, including "This Raging Light" and "Mayhem." She has five forthcoming young adult novels, including "Disney's City of Villains" series, "Remember Me" with Wednesday Books/St. Martin's, and "Practice Girl" with Viking. She also has two picture books in the works, the first of which will be out with HarperKids in 2021. In addition to writing her own stories, Estelle is an editorial consultant, writing coach and educator.