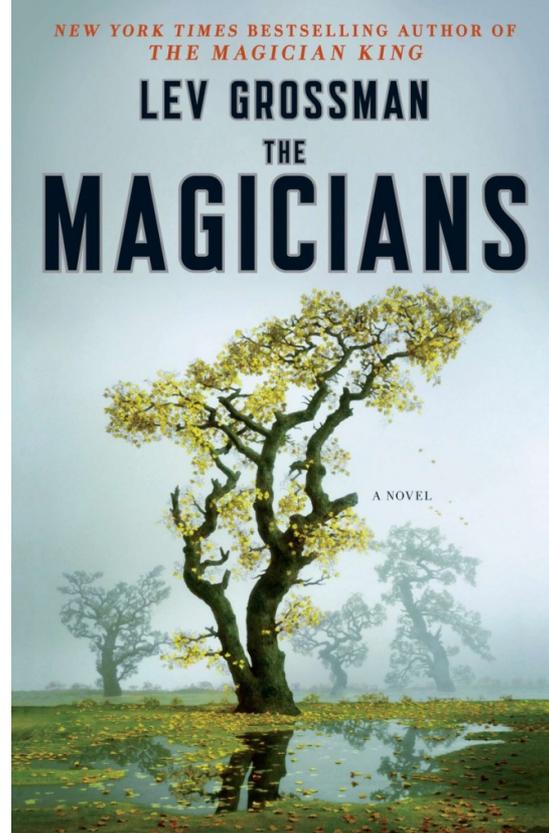


Lev Grossman On Writing And The World Of The Magicians

By **Erin Coughlin** - December 30, 2015



Lev Grossman Toronto 2011



Fans of the best-selling series, **The Magicians** can look forward to seeing their favorite characters on television in the New Year. For author Lev Grossman, it has taken years of hard work and passion to create an original, magical world loved by so many readers all over the world.

“I knew I always wanted to be a writer. Both of my parents are writers so it took me a little while to get up the nerve to say ‘You know what, I want to do this too.’ As a kid for a long time, it was like ‘this is something my parents do like drinking and smoking.’ So it took me a while to go into the idea that I could try to do this too,” said Grossman.

Originally a biochemistry major, Grossman realized his calling to pursue writing during his freshman year of college after reading *Miss Dalloway*.

“When I read Mrs. Dalloway, not only did I love it and appreciate it as a masterpiece (and I still think it’s the greatest novel of the 20th century), I felt like I understood how it worked. I thought, ‘Oh my God, I can see what she’s doing’ and I thought I could feel for the way she was setting up these giant motifs and shifting points of view. I thought ‘I understand this. Maybe I should try. Maybe I could try to do something like that too. But like, 1000 times as good.’ It was a moment where I felt like I found something that I had an intuitive understanding of,” said Grossman.

Fifteen years and three books later, Grossman started working on *The Magicians* series. It

took five years to write the first novel, *The Magicians*. Two years later he finished the second title, *The Magician King* and three years after the sequel, the third book, *The Magician's Land* was released.

"I'd written three books already and I was proud of them. I'm still proud of them, but I didn't feel that I had found my voice as a writer. I thought, there's something that I really want to say that's on the inside and it's not getting onto the page. I thought hard about what the greatest, most important and most informative experience I ever had was. I kept coming back to *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. I thought the way that story worked, it transported me like nothing else. But I also thought, I'm 35 and the things that worry me and concern me are very different from the things that were on my mind when I was eight and read that book," said Grossman.

"I tried to tell a story like that. A story about somebody discovering they had power they didn't know that they had and finding their way into a world nobody else knew existed – but for adults. Using adult language and putting in all the things that adults have to deal with like sex, drinking, depression and all that other stuff. 'Can I tell the kind of story and tell it about my life?' And that was the great experiment of *The Magicians*. As it turned out, that's where my voice was all along. I need to write about magic, the people who do it and I wanted to say what I wanted to say."

Fans of *The Magicians* and viewers looking for a new series about the complex world of wizardry can look forward to the live action show on The SyFy channel in the upcoming New Year. For Grossman, the process of seeing his work adapted for the screen has been both scary and amazing.

“It was initially quite difficult for me to hand over the characters and the world of *The Magicians* to other people to work with. I think if you talk to the show runners they would back me up on this. I did some kicking and screaming but at the same time, like I said, writers don’t talk to other people. You’re not that used to collaborating and obviously you get feedback, but basically you’re running the whole show. Writing is not a collaborative medium. You do the voices. You dress the characters. You decide how everything goes,” said Grossman.

“TV is nothing like that, you’re collaborating with a hundred people at once – including all of the people who are saying the lines. You have to let it go and it took me a little while to do that. That said, it’s really exciting. I liked going to the set, seeing racks of costumes, hearing people say the lines and seeing them do the hand motions to cast a spell. TV does things different from books and it’s pretty wonderful to see those things done with *The Magicians*. That’s really exciting,” said Grossman.

Sometimes the most difficult part about writing is sitting down for uninterrupted writing time. In addition to his fiction writing, Grossman works full time as the senior editor at *Time Magazine*. Unlike many of his successful counterparts, Grossman doesn’t have twelve hours a day to devote to his personal writing.

“I have a job and I have three children. I’ve never in my life written for 12 hours. I do my writing in 45 minutes on the subway, maybe an hour at lunch, on the weekends or vacation. I fit it in wherever I can,” said Grossman.

“I think for a lot of people, especially for people starting out, their experience writing is similar to that. You don’t get to put in a full day’s work. That never happens. The thing I tell people is that if you don’t have a lot of time to be in front of your keyboard, spend that time thinking about your book. If you have to walk 20 blocks just take 20 minutes to go over in your head what you’re writing, what you’re doing and what’s coming next so that when you sit at the keyboard you are ready and you can start typing right away. For me, a lot of

writing is going on when I'm not at my keyboard. I'm just walking around living my life. I'm writing in my head."

For Grossman, social media has played an enjoyable and significant role in connecting with his audience. By developing an online platform he has become more accessible and familiar to his readers. This has also enabled him to show that despite his author bio, Grossman was not an outsider trying to jump on the Harry Potter bandwagon.

"I got on Twitter initially because I realized that they (the readers) didn't know who I was and the ones that did had gotten the wrong idea of who I was," said Grossman.

"It was really important for me to get on Twitter, to surf and go to conventions. To talk to people. To give people a sense of the kind of person I was – which is: I am a nerd with low self esteem just like everybody else and that's where these books are coming from."

Grossman hopes that his readers find his stories both fun and entertaining. The Magician series also answers unaddressed issues that other series do not, including depression, life after graduation and the difficulty of being a wizard in your twenties.

"The first thing I want is for them to have a good time. I want the books to be just fun and entertaining before anything else. A lot of people who have had experiences with depression come away from the books saying, 'Yeah, I recognize some of that. That's something that I've struggled with that I haven't seen written about that much.' So I feel good when people who have dealt with depression find something special in the books," said Grossman.

"People often wonder where do people go after they graduate from Hogwarts? They have the whole rest of their lives ahead of them; what's that like graduating from the school for magic, having those powers and having to figure out what you're going to do with it? We don't hear about the lives of wizards in their 20s and I imagine that some of them have quite a difficult time."

For those pursuing a career in writing – let alone completing an entire novel – the task can feel overwhelming. Grossman generously offers honest and re-assuring advice to aspiring writers.

“When you read a novel, it looks like the person who wrote it knew what they were doing the whole time. Everything is just pieced together neatly. There’s a sense of intention and confidence that runs all the way through the book, like they know exactly what kind of story they wanted to tell and what they wanted to create,” said Grossman.

“The experience of writing a novel is very different. You lose your way and find your way again every day. Every day you come to a point where you say, this is ridiculous I can’t write a novel and in particular, I can’t write this novel. You push through that and eventually you find your way back to it, but not before all these alarm bells are going off in your head saying ‘whoa you got to stop because you’re in way over your head.’ Everybody writing a novel is in way over their head. I wish somebody told me that because it’s really hard to push through it and to keep going.”

Some of the key relationships that contribute to Grossman’s successful writing process include working with his agent, wife, and a group of ten to twenty beta readers.

“The person I work closest with is my wife who is an English professor and a novelist. I wish my readers consisted of many copies of my wife but sometimes you need a stranger to read your book to get a clear sense of what’s happening with it. I do have beta readers but they come in very late in the process. I show my agent my work. She’s an important reader for me,” said Grossman.

In addition to his writing, Grossman is on the Board of Directors for The Electric Literature Series, an organization that explores new ways of storytelling and in particular, digital storytelling. Coincidentally, our conversation took place on the same day that the Shortlist for the National Book Award was released.

As both a novelist and a book reviewer for Time magazine, Grossman discussed and recommended other authors worth looking into.

“Kate Atkinson (*The Jackson Brodie Mysteries*). I think she’s stunningly gifted and has written some of the best books in this millennium, particularly her last two, *Life After Life* and *A God In Ruins*. Rainbow Rowell’s new book *Carry On* is very good, very smart, emotionally raw and romantic. I also like Paul Murray (*The Mark And The Void*),” said Grossman.

After spending the past 10 years working in the world of *The Magicians*, he is excited about and hard at work on a new novel. While Grossman plans to focus on his writing and trying to keep public appearances down, he is set to make an appearance at The Hong Kong Literary Festival.

“I never imagined *The Magicians* would take me to Hong Kong,” said Grossman.