



I'M SITTING IN AN APPLE

ORCHARD. It's a late summer evening, and I have a comfortable place to sit, a draft of my current work-in-progress, and a pen. Everything is perfect, except...

I'm stuck. Majorly, mightily, don't-know-what-to-write-ily stuck. I often find myself in this situation. Sure, I write all the time, but the road from initial idea to finished book can be a long and windy one with many potholes in which to get stuck.

For example, when I started writing *WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU O.J.*, I got seriously stuck. It started out as a picture book, but when I tried to make it shorter, it got longer instead. Also, the main character, an almost-11-year-old girl named Zelly Fried, seemed too old for a picture book. And her relationship with her eccentric Grandpa Ace was too contentious for a picture book. So the book stayed stuck....

Until one day it dawned on me: Maybe it wasn't supposed to be a picture book.

This realization meant that all those extra words I had written were a blessing, not a curse. And Zelly's adversarial relationship with Ace was relatable to 8-12 year olds. And the fact that Ace is such a *meshuggener* (he insists that Zelly walk—and clean up after—a “practice dog” made out of an orange juice jug)?

Let's just say that particular detail worked for tweens. Suddenly, *WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU O.J.* wasn't just unstuck... it was a finished novel. And I had so much fun writing it, I wrote a sequel: *ACES WILD*.

So, *okay*, I say to myself in the apple orchard. *Maybe this newly stuck story is supposed to be something else, too. Perhaps it should be in rhyme? Or maybe I should change the perspective.* The only problem? I've already tried both of these things. My computer has exactly 16 versions of this particular picture book on it, and the earliest is date-stamped five entire years earlier.

I take a deep breath. I pick an apple, take a bite, and try to think of other ways I've gotten myself unstuck. Sometimes, I've gone for a run. Other times, I've taken a shower. But some stories can't be run or bathed loose... and that's exactly how stuck this story is.

Gah!!! I close my eyes in frustration. *Why is writing so hard sometimes???*

“Hey, Erica. You okay?”

I open my eyes and see that two of my friends are in the orchard, too. We are three of the children's book authors who have been selected to participate in the Tent program run by the Yiddish Book Center and supported by PJ Library. They

look amused and mildly concerned. With good reason: It's possible they overheard me yelling at trees.

“Yeah,” I say sheepishly. “I'm just having some trouble with a story.”

My friends nod sympathetically. We've all had a great time at the program, learning from scholars and experts in our field and participating in spirited workshops and discussions. But we're all Jewish writers, which over the week we've come to realize means we question ourselves and our work on a near-continuous basis.

The three of us sit down together. I read my stuck story aloud to them, and we begin to discuss it — what's working, and what isn't. They ask me questions and I ask them questions. And, as darkness begins to fall, I start to feel movement. I scribble as fast as I can in the dwindling light, my heart racing as we talk over each other. My story may not be done yet, but I can feel the wheels turning. At long last — it's starting to come unstuck!

Leaving the orchard, I feel a sense of tremendous relief and gratitude. I can't help but laugh at myself for forgetting one of the best ways of getting unstuck: sharing your writing with trusted friends.

ERICA S. PERL is the author of the forthcoming middle grade novel, *All Three Stooges* (1/18; Knopf), as well as many popular and critically acclaimed books for young readers. She is a crowd-pleasing presenter at schools, libraries, synagogues, and community events. Erica honed her skills working as a trial lawyer in New York City, and, before that, studying theater and driving an ice cream truck. Raised in Vermont, she now lives in Washington, D.C. with her husband, two daughters, and two dogs.
