



## Risks, Rewrites, and Rewards

Get the scoop on the big risk author Rachel Vail took to write her first book—plus a sneak peek at her next book. Rachel's newest series about Elizabeth, a second grader, includes *A Is for Elizabeth* and *Big Mouth Elizabeth*. She is also the author of the popular *Justin Case* series, *Sometimes I'm Bombaloo*, and *Righty and Lefty*.

### When did you write your first book?

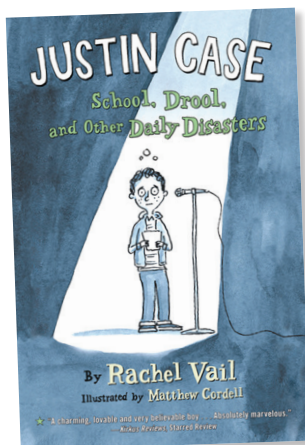
I was a year out of college, working at a theater and hoping to figure out how to be a playwright, when I had an idea that was really more like the voice of a character...she sounded real and funny and like someone I instantly could hear and wanted to know more about, as she struggled through her terrible first day of seventh grade.

I couldn't figure out how to make the book she wanted told about her into a play, so I quit my job, moved home to my parents' house, and worked for a year on writing that book. It was the hardest I had ever worked and the scariest leap I'd ever taken. Mostly because it was the first time I was deciding to try my absolute hardest to do my absolute best, and then to put it out into the world to be judged. No safety net. I had never let myself do anything like that before.

### What's the hardest part of your job? What's the easiest?

The first 19 or 20 drafts of any book are always the hardest for me. The most fun part is the revisions after that! By then I can see the shape of the story and really hear each character's distinctive voice. The moment when I change (or cut!) a sentence or chunk, and suddenly the character is clear, the risk is stark—that's the best. One good sentence can power me through a whole rough week.

Also, I never keep my shoes on when I write. What a great job, right? I imagine things all day, and never have to wear SHOES!



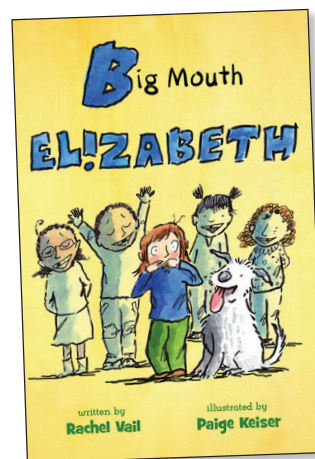
### What are a few of your favorite lines, phrases, or scenes from your books?

A recent fave: the first few lines of *Big Mouth Elizabeth* (from the new *A Is for Elizabeth* series).

*In Class 2B, we are all friends.*

*We are friends with everybody in the whole class.*

*It is not easy.*



What I like about it is that it makes the whole theme of the book clear in just 20 words. It took hundreds of words for me to get there, to figure it out.

I wanted to tell the truth about friendship among elementary school kids. So many adults had told me (and then later, my kids) that "we are all friends here"—and while that is a good and vital goal, it is also, well, "not easy" sometimes to be friends with each of our classmates. When I started writing, I promised myself I would always tell the truth about how it really feels to *this* character, to be growing up in *these imagined circumstances*. I love discovering the honest emotional truth inside my characters, especially when they are FUNNY, as Elizabeth is....

### What's one message you'd like elementary students to get from your books?

I hope kids feel both *ME, TOO!* and *Hmmm, I hadn't thought of it that way* while they read my books. And I hope they come away feeling seen, heard, entertained, understood, and loved. And then I hope they feel fortified enough to be kind and a little more open to other people and their different ways of being, afterwards.



### How do you celebrate the completion of a new book?

After a book is done, I try to fill up on the creativity of other people: I go to shows and movies, and I read SO MUCH! I go to museums and listen to lots of music, and take hikes and runs and swims, and also bake nice treats for people I love, and do some singing and dancing around in my living room.

### Can you share a tidbit from your next book?

Okay, a sneak peek! Here are some of the opening few lines from the next Elizabeth book, *Cat Ears on Elizabeth*, coming out next spring:

*In second grade, we all look great!  
It is not only Mallory who looks great.  
Mallory has glitter folders and bright  
orange sneakers and a huge pink  
eraser.*

*And Mallory has cat ears on her  
headband.*

*Cat ears on your headband is not  
the only way to look great.  
But it is a very good way.*

### What advice would you give a teacher or librarian who is choosing books for the library?

Wow, I would be hesitant to give a teacher or librarian advice, since I bet they know so much more than I do about that!

All I could add to their wisdom is:  
as a reader and former kid, I know I



## WIN!

### A Is for Elizabeth

Number of winners: **five lucky teachers**

How to enter: Circle Reader Action Number 110 on page 25 or go to [LearningMagazine.com](http://LearningMagazine.com).


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always loved when teachers and librarians asked my advice and what I wished I could read more about/which authors I was enjoying—it felt so respectful. As a writer, I would of course advise them to stock ALL my books! But also to make sure they are paying attention to having a great diversity of voices and styles available. It helps everyone to read stories from a wide variety of perspectives; one of the great joys of reading is getting to think with the mind of another...to live a life that is in some way not like your own, but tapping into your inherent empathy to feel connected to a character who might make different choices but shares a common humanity with you.

### How do you celebrate a book's success?



By visiting schools where kids have read and loved the book. I love hearing their reactions and opinions...nothing is more fun than that!



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