

Reader Views

Book reviews, for readers, by readers.

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Interview with Lee Fodi

Author of *Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers*

We are so pleased to interview Lee Fodi from Vancouver, Canada. We are equally pleased that our 11 year old reviewer Haylee Lawler, who read “Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers,” is going to interview Mr. Fodi first. Welcome to Reader Views!

Haylee: Why did you think this story was a mystery, adventure, or for a person to figure out on their own?

Mr. Fodi: Why I think this story is both a mystery and adventure. I think readers don't want authors to tell them everything. I think readers enjoy trying to figure out some of the things that are going on in the story.

Haylee: Do you think it would be best for other kids who are under age, like at age 8,7,9,6,and so on?

Mr. Fodi: When I write a story, I don't try to think who it would be best for, boys or girls, or young kids or older kids. I really just try to write a good tale and hope that it finds an audience. I hope my stories appeal to a lot of kids, despite their ages. I often tell people that *Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers* has a reading level of about 9-12, but that younger children will really enjoy the story as a read aloud. There are lots of illustrations in the books, and of course, if the teacher or parent reading the story can speak in great monster voices (like I like to do), then the book will be even more fun!

Haylee: Why do you think it is the best idea for older kids to read this book instead of smaller kids to read this book?

Mr Fodi: I think all kids will enjoy the adventure in this book, but I think older kids will like some of the messages in this book. I think older kids will really like how Kendra is doing what she thinks is right and how she confronts her fear.

Haylee: Did you think it is a good book too when you wrote this book? What do you think about this book?

Mr. Fodi: I enjoyed this book when I was writing it. I think if I can get wrapped up in the adventure of the story while I'm writing it, then that's a good sign that my readers will also like it.

Haylee: I liked the part where Kendra Kandlestar beats the red thief. What part do you like in the book?

Mr. Fodi: My favorite scene is when Kendra helps Trooogul the Unger. After she's saved his life they are sitting at the edge of the cliff facing each other and she's not sure what he's going to do. He's glaring at her and it's as if he's deciding if he should be grateful for her help, or if he should harm her in some way because Kendra is supposed to be his enemy. I think Trooogul is as confused as Kendra and there's this moment of silence that passes between them as they try to sort out what has just happened. Of course, Kendra decides she won't tell anyone that she helped Trooogul. She makes it a secret. So my other favorite scene is when she is the lair of the red thief and she has to own up to this secret. She has to confront her fear of her secret. I like this scene because she makes a hard decision.

Haylee: Now for my last question. In the story, at the last part, why did her grandfather what to help her look for her family? He was always mean to her. After she was about to get expelled from Ene, only two people voted for her to go so she stayed in Ene. But when she said that she was going to look for her parents when her grandfather asked if he could help look for her parents, why did he? Was he being nice or is he worried about her parents?

Mr. Fodi: Well, Uncle Griffinskitch is a grump, but I don't think he ever meant to be really that mean. Long ago, when Kendra was just a baby, he had fought with Kendra's mother just before she disappeared. So Uncle Griffinskitch was left to take care of Kendra and every time he looks at Kendra, I think he feels some guilt about that fight. And, according to the Elders, Kendra seems to be a lot like her mother, so that only reminds old Uncle Griffinskitch even more about his painful memories. But Uncle Griffinskitch loves Kendra deep down inside and I think he's just as worried about her parents as she is. You see, Kendra isn't the only one to learn a lesson or two in this story. Uncle Griffinskitch learns that he could have been a better brother to Kendra's mother and now he can be a better Uncle to Kendra herself.

Irene: I'm so thrilled that we were able to include Haylee in this interview. She asked some great questions. It sounds like you wrote an incredibly magical book "Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers." Tell us the gist of your book.

Lee: Well, have you ever had a secret? Could you imagine if your secrets fell into the wrong hands? Well, that's just what happens in this book. You see, for over a thousand years the Box of Whispers has guarded all the secrets in the Land of Een—but when the Box is suddenly stolen, five would-be heroes are chosen to go and find the fabled chest. One of these is young Kendra Kandlestar, and she soon finds herself swept away on a magical adventure where doors speak in riddles, plants cast spells, and strange creatures lurk in every shadow.

Irene: What age group does this book attract?

Lee: The book has a reading level of 8-12, but it also draws in younger kids because of the illustrations and the story-telling style of the narrative. Too the youngest of kids, the story is about a girl who ends up fighting a dragon, but older readers will be able to identify some deeper meanings.

Irene: I would imagine they are mostly girls that relate to your main character.

Lee: I thought that would be the case myself, but boys seem to like the book just as much as girls. I think that is because kids in general are attracted to high adventure—and this book has a lot of that.

Having said that, there is no doubt that there is a lot of girl power in this book. Kendra, the 11-year-old heroine, is the most courageous character in the story and is the one who ultimately triumphs over the villainous creature, Rumor the Red Dragon. Captain Jinx is the smallest character (a grasshopper), but she is physically the strongest. Winter Woodsong, the Eldest of the Elders, is an intellectual and wise leader of the Eens.

So, I definitely think girls tune in to this girl power, and I think the boys just love all the monsters and magical mayhem.

Irene: What inspired you to write this book?

Lee: Since, I'm an illustrator in addition to being a writer, I am often inspired by art. In fact, I often say that I draw my way through writer's block, which means I just get out my sketch book and draw to help my imagination flow again. For this book, I was inspired by a painting I did back in 2002. I wasn't setting out to write a story. I just wanted to paint an interesting picture of some small creatures tip-toeing past a giant creature. And that one painting inspired the entire book, Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers. You can still see the spirit of that original painting on the cover of the book.

Irene: Your writing seems to be fairytales and fantasy. This would take a vivid imagination. Tell us how you come up with the plot.

Lee: Well, going back to this painting that I did in 2002, when I was done, I sat back and realized that there was a story bursting off the page. But what was this story? Here we had this large serpent lying in a sea of gold—rather like a scene from *The Hobbit*—and we had the tiny critters sneaking past. One was holding a purple box with stars on it and another was holding a key. But they weren't trying to take any of the gold that was in the picture. So I had to ask myself: Why are they carrying only these few items—such as this magic box—when they could be stealing treasure. So then I realized that what was ever in the box was more valuable than all the treasure in this dragon's lair. So that led to the inevitable question: Just what's in this box? The answer, of course, was whispers. And once I realized that, then this whole story evolved around the tiny Een people trying to get back their precious secrets.

Irene: How did you come up with the personality of the main character, Kendra Kandlestar? Does she duplicate someone that you know?

Lee: To tell you the honest truth, I think most of my characters represent some aspect of me! I can be quite as grumpy as Uncle Griffinkitch, or timid like Oki, or even as obnoxious as Ratchet Ringtail. As for Kendra, well she's really an oddball in this story. She doesn't have any Een friends. All of her companions are animals, and this kind of makes her an outcast. She's weird and different and she basically does things her own way. I was certainly like that as a kid (actually, I suppose I'm still like that). When I was in school, I was in a special class for "creative" kids, which was great in many ways, but of course it also alienated me from some of the other kids in the school. I guess Kendra has a lot of qualities that I admire. She has pluck, and does what she thinks is right and not what she is told is right. I hope I'm like her in that way, and I guess through the character of Kendra I'm trying to demonstrate the power of thinking for yourself.

Irene: Obviously to be a children's book writer, you have to be a kid at heart. What do you believe is keeping you there?

Lee: Well, teaching creative writing kids certainly helps, as does going to visit schools to talk about writing and drawing. I'm exposed to kid energy on a weekly basis, and it helps me find that place. I am truly a big kid at heart. I love a lot of the stories kids love, and we're always talking about the latest Star Wars movie or the latest fantasy book. When I go to the schools, I have this activity I call "Goblin Designing 101." In this activity, I scribble out a creature with the kids telling me what to draw. At first, they think I'm a boring adult and will never do what they ask. But in this activity, they are the bosses, so if they want exploding pimples, then they get exploding pimples! I think it mortifies the teachers sometimes, but the kids love that twenty-minute block of freedom that they can spend with an adult who lets them do things they think they normally shouldn't get away with.

Irene: I often wonder how writers come up with names for their characters. How did you come up with names like "Oki" or "Ratchet Ringtail."

Lee: I actually put a lot of work into my names. I think they can help construct the personality of a character. In this book, all the names use alliteration, where the first and last name begin with the same sound. So we have Juniper Jinx, Honest Oki, Winter Woodsong, etc. I did that just to give the tiny Een people a bit of a sing-song quality to their names. Uncle Griffinskitch (whose first name is Gregor, by the way) was named because I liked the sound of it. I think it sounds like a grumpy name. Plus, I have to confess he was named after my cat, who goes by Griffin publicly, but has the nickname of Skitch. Just like Uncle Griffinskitch, my cat has long hair (even though when he was a kitten, it appeared that he would be very much a short-haired cat!). Kendra was probably the name I agonized over the most. I wanted to keep changing it, but a lot of my creative writing students were hooked into the story as I was writing it and they all really liked the name of Kendra. I guess it is a popular name right now.

Irene: As I read the reviews written by your young readers, I noted most of them said that they just couldn't put the book down. This to me is a real compliment coming from a child's perspective. How difficult is it to write a child's book, keep it simple, and yet capture their attention to the point that they can't wait to read the next chapter?

Lee: In one way, I find it very difficult. I think I have this tendency to want to over-explain everything. I want to make sure everything adds up, so that there are no holes in the plot. Kids are very good at catching such things. But, at the end of the day, I am always writing for my eleven-year-old self...so I try to trust in that. You know, I wrote books throughout my childhood—and I call them books because I made sure they had covers, title pages, and even copyright pages. Well, as I was working on Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers, I was reading a book of mine that I had written when I was ten or eleven years old. There was this whole gag in the book where one character is thinking of onions and another character tells him not to because it will ruin the wish they are trying to make. It was so silly and lovely that I decided to modify this idea and include it in Kendra Kandlestar. So, I basically stole from my ten-year-old self, but it's that type of humor and story telling style that speaks to kids—and I know this, because I wrote it as a young kid.

Irene: When you were that 10 or 12 years old writing stories, had you aspired at that time to have a career as a professional writer?

Lee: You know, I always joke that I decided to be a writer at a young age because of laziness. I grew up on a farm in the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia, Canada and I made a very poor farm boy. At a very young age I wanted to be a farmer, just like my dad, but I was too much of a dreamer. My head was always in the clouds thinking of some story to write. And then when I was ten years old my dad tried to teach me how to drive the tractor and I accidentally ran over this old outhouse we had on our property. It was an old decrepit shack and it tumbled to the ground like a house of cards! Well, if there had been any lingering doubt at that point about what I should do for a career, it was now gone. I think it was pretty clear to me and my family that I was destined for something different than farming! You know, I think I always thought of myself as an author of books, even as a little kid, which is why I put covers and copyright pages on my books. I never wanted to be a movie script writer, or a comic book artist...really my heart always told me that I wanted to tell stories through books. And, you know, it wasn't too long after the famous outhouse incident that I started sending out manuscripts to publishers, even though I was only 11 or 12. I had no idea what I was doing, but I think it was a good experience to start thinking about how to show my work to the world.

Irene: What do you believe captures the reader's attention and makes a child's book a "good book?"

Lee: Well, for me it always comes down to character. In the mail I get from children, they inevitably mention their favorite character. There are some works of children's literature, such as the Wizard of Oz (a huge influence on me, by the way), in which the plot is up and down and doesn't really ever reach one climax, at least not in the traditional way we are taught to think about plot structure. But no one remembers that. What we remember are the marvelous characters. Strong characters can really take a book far and I get a lot of kids asking me for more stories about Kendra. They want to know what happens next to her and her friends, which means they care about the characters.

Irene: Although fiction and fantasy, this book has a much deeper message. What is the message that you want to instill in your young reader?

Lee: In many ways, Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers is about fear—or, more accurately said, about confronting fear. In the book, all the secrets that the characters hide inside the Box of Whispers come attached with a great deal of fear. As a result, this fear helps hatch a terrible monster—literally, Rumor the Red Dragon. By the end of the story Kendra is able to find that "spark" inside of her, and gains strength by standing up to the dragon and facing her fears. I believe that, when we face our fears, we grow and become better people. Of course, I didn't set out to write a book about fear—my intention was to write a fantasy adventure story about a girl who ends up in a dragon's lair...but I find that messages and themes always develop through the writing process, and in this book, I would say confronting fear is definitely the main message.

Irene: In what way do you believe the readers "get the message."

Lee: I think all of us (including kids) get most messages intuitively. We may not always intellectually understand or consciously analyze what we see in a movie or read in a book, but at a gut level we "get it." I think the scene that really sticks with kids in Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers is when she helps the creature, Trooogul the Unger. She is frightened of him, and she knows it is forbidden to help him, but she saves him anyway. I think most kids want to believe and understand that you should help those in trouble, regardless of who they are. So that's the first important part of Kendra's journey—helping someone that "they" (the Elders of Een) say she shouldn't. The second important part is that Kendra is eventually able to stand up and be proud for helping

Trooogul, and she does this by facing the box of whispers, and it's dark master, the red dragon.

You know, I always look to C.S. Lewis as the master of messages in children's fantasy books. In my opinion, no children's author was ever more skilled at telling a great story, while at the same time building in several levels of meaning. The youngest of children might not intellectually understand all his messages at first—but the most important thing is that it doesn't stop them from enjoying a fantastic story. And I hope it's the same with Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers.

Irene: Do you have any children of your own? If so, what are their reactions to the books you write?

Lee: I don't have children of my own, but I teach creative writing workshops to children aged 8-12, so I am constantly plied with questions about my stories. Also, I have a sister who is twelve years younger than I am, so when she was little, I was always inventing stories for her. In a way, she kept me intrigued with writing in the children's fantasy genre because she was always so enthralled with my stories. And that's the great thing about children. Their reactions are immediate and genuine. If they don't like something, they are honest and tell you and, similarly, if they love something they'll let you know that too. For me, there's nothing better than hearing a kid laugh or gasp or cry "eek!" at something I've written.

Irene: Of course, as writers we are thrilled when we get positive strokes about our writing. What do you do when the kid cries "eek!" after reading something you wrote?

Lee: I smile. For me, it's the equivalent of hitting a home run in the World Series. It means I've done what I set out to do.

Irene: You have written other books. In what way are they different from "Kendra Kandlestar and the Box of Whispers"?

Lee: I have illustrated some picture books, and those, of course, are quite different because they speak to a younger audience. More importantly, I haven't written them. I am just interpreting the words created by the author and, really, it's their story. My first published book that I both wrote and illustrated is called *Corranda's Crown*. It is about a girl who discovers the power to speak to animals and fights a beautiful witch who has a power of her own—she is so beautiful that she can transform people into hideous goblins. So Corranda, with her connection with nature, and the witch, with her perversion of nature, come head-to-head by the end of the book. Like *Kendra Kandlestar*, that book has lots of monsters, talking animals and humor, but other than that, they are very different stories.

Irene: And your next book? What is it about and when will it be published?

Lee: I just started working on the sequel to "Kendra Kandlestar" and I hope to have it released in late 2007 or early 2008. Of course, it's a lot of work to write a book, but I will be illustrating it as well, so these things just take time. The most important thing is that I've got a fantastic idea for the book. It will be called "Kendra Kandlestar and the Door to Unger."

Irene: I'm fascinated by your vivid imagination and the ability to put it on paper in a way that the readers are totally captured by the story. Is there anything else you would like your reading audience to know about you or your book?

Lee: Well, I always like to hear from my readers! I encourage them to visit my website at www.leefodi.com. It's packed full with pictures and information about me and my work. Of course, you can also email me through my website, and if you send me a review of my book, I will send you some free e-books as a thank you! Most importantly, I just hope kids out there will keep reading because it is one of the best skills you can ever develop.