Did you want to be a writer even as a kid? No. I didn’t think so. But I did want to be a storyteller. I knew that much.

It was a compulsion, spinning yarns. I often retreated into the elaborate fantasy worlds inside my head, playing out variations on the stories I’d fallen in love with on the page or the big screen, picturing myself as the sword-wielding, laser-blasting, smart-mouthed protagonist. And I was always creative. I just wasn’t sure what my medium would be (I sort of fancied myself a filmmaker in my teens). It wasn’t until college, really, that I fell in love with writing. Then I was hooked.

Is it hard being a writer? Yes. Absolutely. It’s hard being a writer. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great writer. It’s hard being a good writer. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great good writer. I really hate saying that, but it’s true. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great good great writer. It’s hard being a writer. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great good great great writer. It’s hard being a writer. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great good great great great writer. It’s hard being a writer. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great good great great great great writer. It’s hard being a writer. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great good great great great great great writer. It’s hard being a writer. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great good great great great great great great writer. It’s hard being a writer. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great good great great great great great great great writer. It’s hard being a writer. I imagine it’s almost impossible being a great good great great great great great great great great writer.

Do you ever get writer’s block? I don’t like to call it writer’s block. I like to think of it as a knot. You get to a place that’s tangled and it’s all, and it takes a little more time to tease it out. You ever have one of those knots that you have to pick at and pick at, but once you get the first little bit lose the rest comes easy? I’ve never had a knot that I couldn’t untie, though some I’ve had to pick at a lot longer than others.

Where do you get your ideas? From everywhere. Books. Movies. Plays. Pictures. Dreams. Friends. Observations. Eavesdropped conversations. Some of them come to me while I’m driving, running, sleeping. In the bathroom. Waiting in line for a milk shake. Sitting on a park bench. Staring at the cat. Thousands of ideas. Millions of them. We all have them. It’s just that some of us are slightly more adept (or better trained) to catch them as they are flitting by and trap them in a jar for later inspection.

How long does it take you to write a book? Six to eight weeks. Maybe ten. That will get you 75,000 words, approximately 30,000 of which will actually find their way into the finished manuscript. The other 40K will be replaced with even better words in that months-long agonizing exercise in mental and emotional torture we call “revision.” All total it takes about two years to get a story from first sentence to sitting on a shelf at a bookstore near you. At least for me, anyway.

Do you have any advice for young writers who someday would like to get published? You’ll never be perfect. Don’t worry about it. Practice makes ‘good enough.’ Learn your craft. Try new things. Share your work. Don’t get so discouraged that you quit, just discouraged enough that you get ticked off and more determined to prove everybody wrong. Practice your book award acceptance speech in the shower—it will make you feel better. Find the perfect place to write. Marry somebody with good health insurance. Love writing more than anything else you could possibly do.

Did you have to read a lot? I probably read about a hundred books a year. That includes some really short ones and some really long ones. You can’t be a good writer without also being an avid reader. It’s kind of a horse/cart thing.

What’s the worst part about being a writer? The constant crippling fear that I’m not good enough.

What’s the best part about being a writer? Oh man. There are so many fantastic things about being a writer. Going to work in my PJs. Visiting with young readers at schools or over Skype. Signing books (yep—I actually love that part). The best part still has to be that first day on a new novel, though. When I boot up the laptop and stare at the blank screen for a few seconds, fingers hovering over the keys. And then I get that first sentence down and it’s a rush. Pure joy. In that moment absolutely anything is possible. I feel like a demigod. If I’m being honest, it’s all a little downhill from there.

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Q&A With John David Anderson
The Sticky Notes War at Branton Middle School starts small. Shortly after cell phones are banned, notes begin appearing on school lockers. Some of the messages are friendly but many are not. Eighth-grader Frost and his group of misfit friends become a target of bullies, especially after the four boys reluctantly let an unconventional new girl hang out with them. Can the boys’ friendship survive some notoriety in their group? Can the kids at Branton survive the cruel notes? Life in middle school can be harsh but, as Frost and his friends find out, it can have moments of courage and solidarity that keep their hope alive.

2. The novel uses imagery and comparisons associated with heroes and knights. For example, Frost describes the sticky notes that other students put on Wolf’s neatly painted locker as “overlapping like links of chain-mail armor” (p. 339). Discuss that simile and other similar references, and why the author chose them.

3. Steve’s parents loom large in his life. Describe Steve’s relationship with his parents and the problems it causes him. What is Ms. Bixby’s interaction with Steve’s father? How does it help Steve?

5. Describe Brand’s personality, his home situation, his relationship with his father, and how Ms. Bixby helps Brand. Why do Brand and Ms. Bixby keep Ms. Bixby’s help a secret? Why do you think Brand’s father makes a major change at the end of the story?

6. The three boys have to work as a team to accomplish their mission. How do they contradict the view? Explain Topher’s beliefs about Christina. Do his beliefs change?

7. Why do you think the author uses three first-person narratives to tell the story? Why not use only one? What tense are the voices, and what effect does that have? Give examples of the ways that the three voices are distinct.

8. Why does the novel, which is very serious in parts, open with the scene about Rebecca and cooties? What does it reveal about the boys and Ms. Bixby? What other elements in the book add humor?

9. Flashbacks supply information that readers need to understand each boy. Find a flashback in each of the boy’s narratives and discuss how it’s important in helping you understand that boy and his personality.

10. Why is the book’s epigraph from The Hobbit, and how does the epigraph relate to the novel? What role does the book The Hobbit play in the story? Why does it matter so much to the boys? If you’re familiar with The Hobbit, relate its plot to that of Ms. Bixby’s Last Day.

11. Discuss the last chapter and your emotional reaction to it. Why do you think Brand narrates that chapter? What parts of the chapter did you like best? Why?

12. One of Ms. Bixby’s favorite quotes is: “Courage is not a man with a gun in his hand. It’s knowing you’re licked before you begin and you see it through no matter what” (p. 296). Talk about the different ways that the quote applies to characters in the story, pointing to specific actions and attitudes.