Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Fangirl

Written by

Rainbow Rowell

Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

The Simon Snow Series

From Encyclowikia, the people's encyclopedia

> *This article is about the children's book series. For other uses, see Simon Snow (disambiguation).*

Simon Snow is a series of seven fantasy books written by English philologist Gemma T. Leslie. The books tell the story of Simon Snow, an 11-year-old orphan from Lancashire who is recruited to attend the Watford School of Magicks to become a magician. As he grows older, Simon joins a group of magicians – the Mages – who are fighting the Insidious Humdrum, an evil being trying to rid the world of magic.

Since the publication of *Simon Snow and the Mage's Heir* in 2001, the books have been translated into 53 languages and, as of August 2011, have sold more than 380 million copies.

Leslie has been criticized for the violence in the series and for creating a hero who is sometimes selfish and bad tempered. An exorcism scene in the fourth book, *Simon Snow and the Selkies Four,* triggered boycotts among American Christian groups in 2008. But the books are widely considered modern classics, and in 2010, *Time* magazine called Simon "the greatest children's literary character since Huckleberry Finn."

An eighth book, the last in the series, is set to be released May 1, 2012.

Publishing history

Simon Snow and the Mage's Heir, 2001
Simon Snow and the Second Serpent, 2003
Simon Snow and the Third Gate, 2004
Simon Snow and the Selkies Four, 2007
Simon Snow and the Five Blades, 2008
Simon Snow and the Six White Hares, 2009
Simon Snow and the Seventh Oak, 2010
Simon Snow and the Eighth Dance, scheduled to be released May 1, 2012

ONE

There was a boy in her room.

Cath looked up at the number painted on the door, then down at the room assignment in her hand.

Pound Hall, 913.

This was definitely room 913, but maybe it wasn't Pound Hall – all these dormitories looked alike, like public housing towers for the elderly. Maybe Cath should try to catch her dad before he brought up the rest of her boxes.

"You must be Cather," the boy said, grinning and holding out his hand.

"Cath," she said, feeling a panicky jump in her stomach. She ignored his hand. (She was holding a box anyway, what did he expect from her?)

This was a mistake – this had to be a mistake. She knew that Pound was a co-ed dorm. . . . *Is there such a thing as co-ed* rooms?

The boy took the box out of her hands and set it on an empty bed. The bed on the other side of the room was already covered with clothes and boxes.

"Do you have more stuff downstairs?" he asked. "We just finished. I think we're going to get a burger now; do you want to get a burger? Have you been to Pear's yet? Burgers the size of your fist." He picked up her arm. She swallowed. "Make a fist," he said.

Cath did.

"*Bigger* than your fist," the boy said, dropping her hand and picking up the backpack she'd left outside the door. "Do you have more boxes? You've got to have more boxes. Are you hungry?"

He was tall and thin and tan, and he looked like he'd just taken off a stocking cap, dark blond hair flopping in every direction. Cath looked down at her room assignment again. Was this *Reagan*?

"Reagan!" the boy said happily. "Look, your roommate's here."

A girl stepped around Cath in the doorway and glanced back coolly. She had smooth, auburn hair and an unlit cigarette in her mouth. The boy grabbed it and put it in his own mouth. "Reagan, Cather. Cather, Reagan," he said.

"Cath," Cath said.

Reagan nodded and fished in her purse for another cigarette. "I took this side," she said, nodding to the pile of boxes on the right side of the room. "But it doesn't matter. If you've got feng shui issues, feel free to move my shit." She turned to the boy. "Ready?"

He turned to Cath. "Coming?"

Cath shook her head.

When the door shut behind them, she sat on the bare mattress that was apparently hers – feng shui was the least of her issues – and laid her head against the cinder block wall.

She just needed to settle her nerves.

To take the anxiety she felt like black static behind her eyes and an extra heart in her throat, and shove it all back down to her stomach where it belonged – where she could at least tie it into a nice knot and work around it.

Her dad and Wren would be up any minute, and Cath didn't want them to know she was about to melt down. If Cath melted down, her dad would melt down. And if *either* of them melted down, Wren would act like they were doing it on purpose, just to

ruin her perfect first day on campus. Her beautiful new adventure.

You're going to thank me for this, Wren kept saying.

The first time she'd said it was back in June.

Cath had already sent in her university housing forms, and of course she'd put Wren down as her roommate – she hadn't thought twice about it. The two of them had shared a room for eighteen years, why stop now?

"We've shared a room for *eighteen years,*" Wren argued. She was sitting at the head of Cath's bed, wearing her infuriating I'm the Mature One face.

"And it's worked out great," Cath said, waving her arm around their bedroom – at the stacks of books and the Simon Snow posters, at the closet where they shoved all their clothes, not even worrying most of the time what belonged to whom.

Cath was sitting at the foot of the bed, trying not to look like the Pathetic One Who Always Cries.

"This is college," Wren persisted. "The whole point of college is meeting new people."

"The whole point of having a twin sister," Cath said, "is not having to worry about this sort of thing. Freaky strangers who steal your tampons and smell like salad dressing and take cell phone photos of you while you sleep . . ."

Wren sighed. "What are you even talking about? Why would anybody smell like salad dressing?"

"Like vinegar," Cath said. "Remember when we went on the freshman tour, and that one girl's room smelled like Italian dressing?"

"No."

"Well, it was gross."

"It's college," Wren said, exasperated, covering her face with her hands. "It's supposed to be an *adventure*."

"It's already an adventure." Cath crawled up next to her sister

and pulled Wren's hands away from her face. "The whole prospect is already terrifying."

"We're supposed to meet new people," Wren repeated.

"I don't need new people."

"That just shows how much you need new people. . . ." Wren squeezed Cath's hands. "Cath, think about it. If we do this together, people will treat us like we're the same person. It'll be four years before anyone can even tell us apart."

"All they have to do is pay attention." Cath touched the scar on Wren's chin, just below her lip. (Sledding accident. They were nine, and Wren was on the front of the sled when it hit the tree. Cath had fallen off the back into the snow.)

"You know I'm right," Wren said.

Cath shook her head. "I don't."

"Cath . . ."

"Please don't make me do this alone."

"You're never alone," Wren said, sighing again. "That's the whole fucking point of having a twin sister."

"This is really nice," their dad said, looking around Pound 913 and setting a laundry basket full of shoes and books on Cath's mattress.

"It's not nice, Dad," Cath said, standing stiffly by the door. "It's like a hospital room, but smaller. And without a TV."

"You've got a great view of campus," he said.

Wren wandered over to the window. "My room faces a parking lot."

"How do you know?" Cath asked.

"Google Earth."

Wren couldn't wait for all this college stuff to start. She and her roommate – *Courtney* – had been talking for weeks. Courtney was from Omaha, too. The two of them had already met and gone

shopping for dorm-room stuff together. Cath had tagged along and tried not to pout while they picked out posters and matching desk lamps.

Cath's dad came back from the window and put an arm around her shoulders. "It's gonna be okay," he said.

She nodded. "I know."

"Okay," he said, clapping. "Next stop, Schramm Hall. Second stop, pizza buffet. Third stop, my sad and empty nest."

"No pizza," Wren said. "Sorry, Dad. Courtney and I are going to the freshman barbecue tonight." She shot her eyes at Cath. "Cath should go, too."

"*Yes* pizza," Cath said defiantly.

Her dad smiled. "Your sister's right, Cath. You should go. Meet new people."

"All I'm going to do for the next nine months is meet new people. Today I choose pizza buffet."

Wren rolled her eyes.

"All right," their dad said, patting Cath on the shoulder. "Next stop, Schramm Hall. Ladies?" He opened the door.

Cath didn't move. "You can come back for me after you drop her off," she said, watching her sister. "I want to start unpacking."

Wren didn't argue, just stepped out into the hall. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," she said, not quite turning to look at Cath.

"Sure," Cath said.

It did feel good, unpacking. Putting sheets on the bed and setting her new, ridiculously expensive textbooks out on the shelves over her new desk.

When her dad came back, they walked together to Valentino's. Everyone they saw along the way was about Cath's age. It was creepy.

"Why is everybody blond?" Cath asked. "And why are they all white?"

Her dad laughed. "You're just used to living in the least-white neighborhood in Nebraska."

Their house in South Omaha was in a Mexican neighborhood. Cath's was the only white family on the block.

"Oh, God," she said, "do you think this town has a taco truck?"

"I think I saw a Chipotle—"

She groaned.

"Come on," he said, "you like Chipotle."

"Not the point."

When they got to Valentino's, it was packed with students. A few, like Cath, had come with their parents, but not many. "It's like a science fiction story," she said, "No little kids . . . Nobody over thirty . . . Where are all the old people?"

Her dad held up his slice of pizza. "Soylent Green."

Cath laughed.

"I'm not old, you know." He was tapping the table with the two middle fingers of his left hand. "Forty-one. The other guys my age at work are just starting to have kids."

"That was good thinking," Cath said, "getting us out of the way early. You can start bringing home chicks now – the coast is clear."

"All my chicks . . . ," he said, looking down at his plate. "You guys are the only chicks I'm worried about."

"Ugh. Dad. Weird."

"You know what I mean. What's up with you and your sister? You've never fought like this before. . . ."

"We're not fighting *now,*" Cath said, taking a bite of bacon-cheeseburger pizza. "Oh, geez." She spit it out.

"What's wrong, did you get an eyelid?"

"No. Pickle. It's okay. I just wasn't expecting it."

"You *seem* like you're fighting," he said.

Cath shrugged. She and Wren weren't even talking much, let alone fighting. "Wren just wants more . . . independence."

"Sounds reasonable," he said.

Of course it does, Cath thought, *that's Wren's specialty.* But she let it drop. She didn't want her dad to worry about this right now. She could tell by the way he kept tapping the table that he was already wearing thin. Way too many normal-dad hours in a row.

"Tired?" she asked.

He smiled at her, apologetically, and put his hand in his lap. "Big day. Big, hard day – I mean, I knew it would be." He raised an eyebrow. "Both of you, same day. *Whoosh*. I still can't believe you're not coming home with me. . . ."

"Don't get too comfortable. I'm not sure I can stick this out a whole semester." She was only slightly kidding, and he knew it.

"You'll be fine, Cath." He put his hand, his less twitchy hand, over hers and squeezed. "And so will I. You know?"

Cath let herself look in his eyes for a moment. He looked tired – and, yes, twitchy – but he was holding it together.

"I still wish you'd get a dog," she said.

"I'd never remember to feed it."

"Maybe we could train it to feed you."

When Cath got back to her room, her roommate – Reagan – was still gone. Or maybe she was gone again; her boxes looked untouched. Cath finished putting her own clothes away, then opened the box of personal things she'd brought from home.

She took out a photo of herself and Wren, and pinned it to the corkboard behind her desk. It was from graduation. Both of them were wearing red robes and smiling. It was before Wren cut her hair. . . .

Wren hadn't even told Cath she was going to do that. Just came home from work at the end of the summer with a pixie cut. It looked awesome – which probably meant it would look awesome on Cath, too. But Cath could never get that haircut now, even if she could work up the courage to cut off fifteen inches. She couldn't single-white-female her own twin sister.

Next Cath took out a framed photo of their dad, the one that had always sat on their dresser back home. It was an especially handsome photo, taken on his wedding day. He was young and smiling, and wearing a little sunflower on his lapel. Cath set it on the shelf above her desk.

Then she set out a picture from prom, of her and Abel. Cath was wearing a shimmering green dress, and Abel had a matching cummerbund. It was a good picture of Cath, even though her face looked naked and flat without her glasses. And it was a good picture of Abel, even though he looked bored.

He always looked kind of bored.

Cath probably should have texted Abel by now, just to tell him that she'd made it – but she wanted to wait until she felt more breezy and nonchalant. You can't take back texts. If you come off all moody and melancholy in a text, it just sits there in your phone, reminding you of what a drag you are.

At the bottom of the box were Cath's Simon and Baz posters. She laid these out on her bed carefully – a few were originals, drawn or painted just for Cath. She'd have to choose her favorites; there wasn't room for them all on the corkboard, and Cath had already decided not to hang any on the walls, out where God and everybody would notice them.

She picked out three. . . .

Simon raising the Sword of Mages. Baz lounging on a fanged black throne. The two of them walking together through whirling gold leaves, scarves whipping in the wind.

There were a few more things left in the box – a dried corsage, a ribbon Wren had given her that said CLEAN PLATE CLUB, commemorative busts of Simon and Baz that she'd ordered from the Noble Collection. . . .

Cath found a place for everything, then sat in the beat-up wooden desk chair. If she sat right here, with her back to Reagan's bare walls and boxes, it almost felt like home.



There was a boy in Simon's room.

A boy with slick, black hair and cold, grey eyes. He was spinning around, holding a cat high in the air while a girl jumped and clutched at it. "Give it *back,*" the girl said. "You'll hurt him."

The boy laughed and held the cat higher – then noticed Simon standing in the doorway and stopped, his face sharpening.

"Hullo," the dark-haired boy said, letting the cat drop to the floor. It landed on all four feet and ran from the room. The girl ran after it.

The boy ignored them, tugging his school jacket neatly into place and smiling with the left side of his mouth. "I know you. You're Simon Snow . . . the Mage's Heir." He held out his hand smugly. "I'm Tyrannus Basilton Pitch. But you can call me Baz – we're going to be roommates."

Simon scowled and ignored the boy's pale hand. "What did you think you were doing with her cat?"

—from chapter 3, *Simon Snow and the Mage's Heir,*
copyright © 2001 by Gemma T. Leslie

TWO

In books, when people wake up in a strange place, they always have that disoriented moment when they don't know where they are.

That had never happened to Cath; she always remembered falling asleep.

But it still felt weird to hear her same-old alarm going off in this brand-new place. The light in the room was strange, too yellow for morning, and the dorm air had a detergenty twang she wasn't sure she'd get used to. Cath picked up her phone and turned off the alarm, remembering that she still hadn't texted Abel. She hadn't even checked her e-mail or her FanFixx account before she went to bed.

"first day," she texted Abel now. *"more later. x, o, etc."*

The bed on the other side of the room was still empty.

Cath could get used to this. Maybe Reagan would spend all her time in her boyfriend's room. Or at his apartment. Her boyfriend looked older – he probably lived off campus with twenty other guys, in some ramshackle house with a couch in the front yard.

Even with the room to herself, Cath didn't feel safe changing in here. Reagan could walk in at any minute, Reagan's boyfriend could walk in at any minute . . . And either one of them could be a cell- phone-camera pervert.

Cath took her clothes to the bathroom and changed in a stall. There was a girl at the sinks, desperately trying to make friendly eye contact. Cath pretended not to notice.

She finished getting ready with plenty of time to eat breakfast but didn't feel up to braving the dining hall; she still didn't know where it was, or how it worked. . . .

In new situations, all the trickiest rules are the ones nobody bothers to explain to you. (And the ones you can't google.) Like, where does the line start? What food can you take? Where are you supposed to stand, then where are you supposed to sit? Where do you go when you're done, why is everyone watching you? . . . *Bah*.

Cath broke open a box of protein bars. She had four more boxes and three giant jars of peanut butter shoved under her bed. If she paced herself, she might not have to face the dining hall until October.

She flipped open her laptop while she chewed on a carob-oat bar and clicked through to her FanFixx account. There were a bunch of new comments on her page, all people wringing their hands because Cath hadn't posted a new chapter of *Carry On* yesterday.

Hey, guys, she typed. *Sorry about yesterday. First day of school, family stuff, etc. Today might not happen either. But I promise you I'll be back in black on Tuesday, and that I have something especially wicked planned. Peace out, Magicath.*

Walking to class, Cath couldn't shake the feeling that she was pretending to be a college student in a coming-of-age movie. The setting was perfect – rolling green lawns, brick buildings, kids everywhere with backpacks. Cath shifted her bag uncomfortably on her back. *Look at me – I'm a stock photo of a college student.*

She made it to American History ten minutes early, which still wasn't early enough to get a desk at the back of the class. Everybody in the room looked awkward and nervous, like they'd spent way too much time deciding what to wear.

(*Start as you mean to go on,* Cath had thought when she laid out her clothes last night. Jeans. Simon T-shirt. Green cardigan.)

The boy sitting in the desk next to her was wearing earbuds and self-consciously bobbing his head. The girl on Cath's other side kept flipping her hair from one shoulder to the other.

Cath closed her eyes. She could feel their desks creaking. She could smell their deodorant. Just knowing they were there made her feel tight and cornered.

If Cath had slightly less pride, she could have taken this class with her sister – she and Wren both needed the history credits. Maybe she should be taking classes with Wren while they still had a few in common; they weren't interested in any of the same subjects. Wren wanted to study marketing – and maybe get a job in advertising like their dad.

Cath couldn't imagine having any sort of job or *career*. She'd majored in English, hoping that meant she could spend the next four years reading and writing. And maybe the next four years after that.

Anyway, she'd already tested out of Freshman Comp, and when she met with her adviser in the spring, Cath convinced him she could handle Intro to Fiction-Writing, a junior-level course. It was the only class – maybe the only thing about college – Cath was looking forward to. The professor who taught it was an actual novelist. Cath had read all three of her books (about decline and desolation in rural America) over the summer.

"Why are you reading that?" Wren had asked when she noticed.

"What?"

"Something without a dragon or an elf on the cover."

"I'm branching out."

"Shh," Wren said, covering the ears on the movie poster above her bed. "Baz will hear you."

"Baz is secure in our relationship," Cath had said, smiling despite herself.

Thinking about Wren now made Cath reach for her phone.

Wren had probably gone out last night.

It had sounded like the whole campus was up partying. Cath felt under siege in her empty dorm room. Shouting. Laughing. Music. All of it coming from every direction. Wren wouldn't have been able to resist the noise.

Cath dug her phone out of her backpack.

"you up?" Send.

A few seconds later, her phone chimed. *"isn't that my line?"*

"too tired to write last night," Cath typed, *"went to bed at 10."*

Chime. *"neglecting your fans already . . ."*

Cath smiled. *"always so jealous of my fans . . ."*

"have a good day"

"yeah - you too"

A middle-aged Indian man in a reassuring tweed jacket walked into the lecture hall. Cath turned down her phone and slid it into her bag.

When she got back to her dorm, she was starving. At this rate, her protein bars wouldn't last a week. . . .

There was a boy sitting outside her room. The same one. Reagan's boyfriend? Reagan's cigarette buddy?

"Cather!" he said with a smile. He started to stand up as soon as he saw her – which was more of a production than it should have been; his legs and arms were too long for his body.

"It's Cath," she said.

"Are you sure?" He ran a hand through his hair. Like he was confirming that it was still messy. "Because I really like Cather."

"I'm sure," she said flatly. "I've had a lot of time to think about it."

He stood there, waiting for her to open the door.

"Is Reagan here?" Cath asked.

"If Reagan were here" – he smiled – "I'd already be inside."

Cath pinched her key but didn't open the door. She wasn't up for this. She was already overdosing on *new* and *other* today. Right now she just wanted to curl up on her strange, squeaky bed and inhale three protein bars. She looked over the boy's shoulder. "When is she getting here?"

He shrugged.

Cath's stomach clenched. "Well, I can't just let you in," she blurted.

"Why not?"

"I don't even know you."

"Are you kidding?" He laughed. "We met yesterday. I was *in the room* when you met me."

"Yeah, but I don't know you. I don't even know Reagan."

"Are you going to make her wait outside, too?"

"Look . . ." Cath said. "I can't just let strange guys into my room. I don't even know your name. This whole situation is too rapey."

"Rapey?"

"You understand," she said, "right?"

He dropped an eyebrow and shook his head, still smiling. "Not really. But now I don't want to come in with you. The word 'rapey' makes me uncomfortable."

"Me, too," she said gratefully.

He leaned against the wall and slid back onto the floor, looking up at her. Then he held up his hand. "I'm Levi, by the way."

Cath frowned and took his hand lightly, still holding her keys. "Okay," she said, then opened the door and closed it as quickly as possible behind her.

She grabbed her laptop and her protein bars, and crawled into the corner of her bed.

Cath was trying to pace her side of the room, but there wasn't enough floor. It already felt like a prison in here, especially now that Reagan's boyfriend, Levi, was standing guard – or sitting guard, whatever – out in the hall. Cath would feel better if she could just talk to somebody. She wondered if it was too soon to call Wren. . . .

She called her dad instead. And left a voice mail.

She texted Abel. *"hey. one down. what up?"*

She opened her sociology book. Then opened her laptop. Then got up to open a window. It was warm out. People were chasing each other with Nerf guns outside a fraternity house across the street. Pi-Kappa-Weird-Looking O.

Cath pulled out her phone and dialed.

"Hey," Wren answered, "how was your first day?"

"Fine. How was yours?"

"Good," Wren said. Wren *always* managed to sound breezy and nonchalant. "I mean, nerve-racking, I guess. I went to the wrong building for Statistics."

"That sucks."

The door opened, and Reagan and Levi walked in. Reagan gave Cath an odd look, but Levi just smiled.

"Yeah," Wren said. "It only made me a few minutes late, but I still felt so stupid – Hey, Courtney and I are on our way to dinner, can I call you back? Or do you just want to meet us for lunch tomorrow? I think we're going to start meeting at Selleck Hall at noon. Do you know where that is?"

"I'll find it," Cath said.

"Okay, cool. See you then."

"Cool," Cath said, pressing End and putting her phone in her pocket.

Levi had already unfurled himself across Reagan's bed.

"Make yourself useful," Reagan said, throwing a crumpled-up sheet at him. "Hey," she said to Cath.

"Hey," Cath said. She stood there for a minute, waiting for some sort of conversation to happen, but Reagan didn't seem interested. She was going through all her boxes, like she was looking for something.

"How was your first day?" Levi asked.

It took a second for Cath to realize he was talking to her. "Fine," she said.

"You're a freshman, right?" He was making Reagan's bed. Cath wondered if he was planning to stay the night – that would *not* be on. At all.

He was still looking at her, smiling at her, so she nodded.

"Did you find all your classes?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Are you meeting people?"

Yeah, she thought, *you people*.

"Not intentionally," she said.

She heard Reagan snort.

"Where are your pillowcases?" Levi asked the closet.

"Boxes," Reagan said.

He started emptying a box, setting things on Reagan's desk as if he knew where they went. His head hung forward like it was only loosely connected to his neck and shoulders. Like he was one of those action figures that's held together inside by worn-out rubber bands. Levi looked a little wild. He and Reagan both did. *People tend to pair off that way,* Cath thought, *in matched sets*.

"So, what are you studying?" he asked Cath.

"English," she said, then waited too long to say, "What are you studying?"

He seemed delighted to be asked the question. Or any question. "Range management."

Cath didn't know what that meant, but she didn't want to ask.

"Please don't start talking about range management," Reagan groaned. "Let's just make that a rule, for the rest of the year. No talking about range management in my room."

"It's Cather's room, too," Levi said.

"Cath," Reagan corrected him.

"What about when you're not here?" he asked Reagan. "Can we talk about range management when you're not actually in the room?"

"When I'm not actually in the room . . . ," she said, "I think you're going to be waiting out in the hall."

Cath smiled at the back of Reagan's head. Then she saw Levi watching her and stopped.

Everyone in the classroom looked like *this* was what they'd been waiting for all week. It was like they were all waiting for a concert to start. Or a midnight movie premiere.

When Professor Piper walked in, a few minutes late, the first thing Cath noticed was that she was smaller than she looked in the photos on her book jackets.

Maybe that was stupid. They were just head shots, after all. But Professor Piper really filled them up – with her high cheekbones; her wide, watered-down blue eyes; and a spectacular head of long brown hair.

In person, the professor's hair was just as spectacular, but streaked with gray and a little bushier than in the pictures. She

was so small, she had to do a little hop to sit on top of her desk.

"So," she said instead of "hello." "Welcome to Fiction-Writing. I recognize a few of you—" She smiled around the room at people who weren't Cath.

Cath was clearly the only freshman in the room. She was just starting to figure out what marked the freshmen. . . . The too-new backpacks. Makeup on the girls. Jokey Hot Topic T-shirts on the boys.

Everything on Cath, from her new red Vans to the dark purple eyeglasses she'd picked out at Target. All the upperclassmen wore heavy black Ray-Ban frames. All the professors, too. If Cath got a pair of black Ray-Bans, she could probably order a gin and tonic around here without getting carded.

"Well," Professor Piper said. "I'm glad you're all here." Her voice was warm and breathy – you could say "she purred" without reaching too far – and she talked just softly enough that everyone had to sit really still to hear her.

"We have a lot to do this semester," she said, "so let's not waste another minute of it. Let's dive right in." She leaned forward on the desk, holding on to the lip. "Are you ready? Will you dive with me?"

Most people nodded. Cath looked down at her notebook.

"Okay. Let's start with a question that doesn't really have an answer. . . . Why do we write fiction?"

One of the older students, a guy, decided he was game. "To express ourselves," he offered.

"Sure," Professor Piper said. "Is that why you write?"

The guy nodded.

"Okay . . . why else?"

"Because we like the sound of our own voices," a girl said. She had hair like Wren's, but maybe even cooler. She looked like Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby* (wearing a pair of Ray-Bans).

"Yes," Professor Piper laughed. It was a fairy laugh, Cath thought. "That's why I write, definitely. That's why I *teach*." They all laughed with her. "Why else?"

Why do I write? Cath tried to come up with a profound answer – knowing she wouldn't speak up, even if she did.

"To explore new worlds," someone said.

"To explore old ones," someone else said. Professor Piper was nodding.

To be somewhere else, Cath thought.

"So . . . ," Professor Piper purred. "Maybe to make sense of ourselves?"

"To set ourselves free," a girl said.

To get free of ourselves.

"To show people what it's like inside our heads," said a boy in tight red jeans.

"Assuming they want to know," Professor Piper added. Everyone laughed.

"To make people laugh."

"To get attention."

"Because it's all we know how to do."

"Speak for yourself," the professor said. "I play the piano. But keep going – I love this. I love it."

"To *stop* hearing the voices in our head," said the boy in front of Cath. He had short dark hair that came to a dusky point at the back of his neck.

To stop, Cath thought.

To stop being anything or anywhere at all.

"To leave our mark," Mia Farrow said. "To create something that will outlive us."

The boy in front of Cath spoke up again: "Asexual reproduction."

Cath imagined herself at her laptop. She tried to put into words how it felt, what happened when it was good, when it was working,

when the words were coming out of her before she knew what they were, bubbling up from her chest, like rhyming, like rapping, *like jump-roping,* she thought, jumping just before the rope hits your ankles.

"To share something true," another girl said. Another pair of Ray-Bans.

Cath shook her head.

"Why do we write fiction?" Professor Piper asked.

Cath looked down at her notebook.

To disappear.



He was so focused – and frustrated – he didn't even see the girl with the red hair sit down at his table. She had pigtails and old-fashioned pointy spectacles, the kind you'd wear to a fancy dress party if you were going as a witch.

"You're going to tire yourself out," the girl said.

"I'm just trying to do this right," Simon grunted, tapping the two-pence coin again with his wand and furrowing his brow painfully. Nothing happened.

"Here," she said, crisply waving her hand over the coin.

She didn't have a wand, but she wore a large purple ring. There was yarn wound round it to keep it on her finger. *"Fly away home."*

With a shiver, the coin grew six legs and a thorax and started to scuttle away. The girl swept it gently off the desk into a jar.

"How did you do that?" Simon asked. She was a first year, too, just like him; he could tell by the green shield on the front of her sweater.

"You don't *do* magic," she said, trying to smile modestly and mostly succeeding. "You *are* magic."

Simon stared at the 2p ladybird.

"I'm Penelope Bunce," the girl said, holding out her hand.

"I'm Simon Snow," he said, taking it.

"I know," Penelope said, and smiled.

—from chapter 8, *Simon Snow and the Mage's Heir,*

copyright © 2001 by Gemma T. Leslie