

# Interview Q&A

*Author M.R. Neer answers questions about himself, his writing, and his book.*

**1. What's your background with writing?** It seems like I've been writing all my life in one way or another. My first story was a symbolic tale called *The Corridor*, where the main character would explore different worlds from doors on a hallway, looking for his purpose in life. I wrote it for a special Humanities class at my high school in the Chicago area. I also wrote my first poem when I was 18 and continued off and on over the years. Usually they were about an experience of love or travel or nature that I had. Someday I'll publish them as a poetic autobiography.

But I also worked as a free-lance writer and newsletter writer in Washington, D.C. in the '80s, and I wrote news and feature articles for trade magazines in the awards, personalization, and graphic products industries for 30 years – still do, in fact. I published several nonfiction booklets -- ***57 Ways to Find New Distributors*** (1982), a complete 3-part ***Life Story Writing Kit*** (1988), ***40 Ways to Profit Through Personalization*** (1995), ***The Professional Edge*** (2003), and ***Creative Showroom Display*** (2005) on CD.

In 1983, I got my first computer (a Kaypro, also known as Darth Vader's Lunchbox, and a Diablo dot-matrix printer) and attempted my first fiction (a fantasy featuring my nieces and nephews as heroes), but I never finished it. In 1986 (on an early PC), I wrote a fairy tale for my brother's wedding, naturally called ***The Wedding Tale***, or *How the Prince and Princess Grew Deeper in Love and Won the King's Blessing*. This was a hint of what was to come.

In recent times, I've been writing marketing materials for brochures and websites, complete lessons for grades K-12, and advanced talks on the application of consciousness to everyday life that I present at our local TM center. But in the last two years, I have found I want to focus on my novels.

**1a. How has living in Fresno, California, influenced your writing?** I grew up in Chicago and went to school at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Then, I got my first job teaching English and Journalism on an army base in San Juan, Puerto Rico. While there, my family moved to Fresno, so after two years on the island, I moved back to Fresno. I taught English at a Parlier Middle School, and then at Bullard, Edison, and Roosevelt high schools as well as Reedley College and Kaplan College.

Living here has helped me appreciate the diversity of cultures which I celebrate in my books. Also, I have been writing K-12 lessons for DataWORKS Educational Research Co. in Fowler. Writing the passages for these lessons gave me the confidence to plunge ahead with my novels. It has been great training in writing simply about characters, plot, setting, theme, and more.

**2. How did you get the idea for *The Elixir of Freedom* and this *Light Finder Legends* series?** It started when I was giving talks about transcending through meditation, and I organized it around six different flavors of the experience of pure consciousness which is natural to the human nervous system. All of these experiences revolve around light – either symbolically or actually – thus the idea of finding light. I

thought I should do a book, and I began it as nonfiction. Then through some coaching at the Quantum Leap Marketing conference led by Steve Harrison, I realized that people will remember these experiences more if I write about them in story format with characters as heroes who have these experiences. So I switched to fiction, and immediately I knew this is what I always wanted to do. I just had to believe I could do it.

In another way, this goes way back to when I was 13. At that time, my two favorite books were *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and *The Lives of the Saints*. Both talked about how to live a good life. Then, when I was researching titles for this book series, I found out that the original meaning of “legend” was to tell the stories of saints. Saints were people who lived or stood up for the “light”. They were heroes. So I was coming full circle.

**3. What’s your writing routine?** Ha! I’m afraid it’s not much of a routine. I have three jobs, so I had to make the time on weekends or on holidays. I wrote rough drafts for 5 of the 6 books in the series in 2014, and that convinced me that I could do it. It took me about six months to then polish Book One, and another six months to get it edited and ready for press. As I have told some people, the hardest part of this project was keeping the seat of my pants in the chair.

Also, I made use of the silence in my daily meditations. I know when I settle down to pure consciousness I’m at the source of creativity. So during the day I would just ruminate about the plot or characters, meditate, and then sometime after that, often while driving or just before sleep, the right idea would just come rolling out. Then I would quickly get a piece of paper and write down a summary of the ideas, which I would then flesh out when I sat down to write.

I’ve heard other writers talk about how the characters and setting dictate what happens next in the plot, and that was my experience too. Once I gave a direction to the plot and created the characters, then further details had to be consistent with the character. That’s what it means to say the “book writes itself.”

**4. Why do you think people will like *The Elixir of Freedom*?** Many will say it’s a good story or it’s inspiring. But I think there are some deeper values that readers will experience, and I made a list of those. Ten Reasons I Think People Will Like This Novel:

1. It's a story of personal growth with heroic characters.
2. It shows how to solve problems by bringing light.
3. It models how to live by intuition.
4. It demonstrates how to live in tune with nature.
5. It reveals the power of legends.
6. It will inspire you to be a Light Finder.
7. It will stretch your mind to new ways of thinking.
8. It will stir your heart and soul with strong feelings.

9. It will give you a vision of a better life and a better world.
10. It will expand your consciousness by swinging between contrasting values.

Some of these reasons are part of Visionary Fiction, which is a new genre that portrays a vision of a better life and a better world (see [www.visionaryfictionalliance.org](http://www.visionaryfictionalliance.org)). VF usually involves some kind of inner journey, some kind of ancient embedded wisdom, and inner tools (such as dreams, visions, intuition, etc.) that character use along the way. It combines elements of fantasy, science fiction, and inspirational/spiritual writing.

**5. Who is your target market?** I think most of my readers will be interested in personal growth of some kind. They will be involved in self-improvement methods, better communication, wellness, yoga, or meditation. Thus, my readers are not a certain age group; they could be adults of any age, and because the main characters are about age 21, it will also appeal to the young adult market.

**6. Will kids want to read it?** Yes, I think kids about 6<sup>th</sup> grade and up will enjoy the book. Why? I think for two reasons: 1) They can relate to the characters, and 2) it shows them how to live by resolving problems in a non-violent way, more from the inside out. I think that will appeal to the natural idealism that kids have. In addition, the story has moments of fantasy, which will appeal to teens who have navigated video games, but it's also grounded in real experience.

**7. What is the setting of the book?** *The Elixir of Freedom* takes place in a place like West Bengal in India in the 1890s. That was my model, and you'll see a lot of the details of that land – the trees, the Thorn Hedge, the wagons, the crops, the clothes, the soldiers' outfits, and the big river. I wanted a time period that was simpler and not so gadget-heavy like today. I wanted the characters to be more involved with nature. Thus, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, about 1890, was a good time. However, I wanted the place to resonate with every time and place so I made it an imaginary place called Bengalia and set it in the Land of Gaia. Gaia is the name for Mother Earth. In fact, the first title of the series was Earth Tales.

**8. What are the main themes of the book?** You'll see as you read that the themes revolve around three ideas – light, nature, and legends. The actual themes unfolded as I wrote. The power of light to set things right was a given as I wanted to build the story around the experience of Light gained by the characters. Its importance was accentuated by the smoke of pollution and the darkness of the mines. I also wanted to contrast the nature of the forest with the factory mine and with the town that was out of touch with nature. Working with nature rather than against it was a key to the resolution of the plot. Finally, I wanted to connect the story to the old legends of the Ramayana and the kingdom of Raam. But

I was amazed to discover a whole new level of legend as I wrote this story. I found out that legends are alive, and I hope that comes out at the end.

**9. What's behind the idea of the series – The Light Finder Legends?** Well, the first thing is I wanted the heroes to go on a search for light, as I believe all heroes do! As I mention in the Prologue, a Light Finder is an ordinary person who does extraordinary things. He or she takes consistent action to make the world a better place. Whether through knowledge, through justice, or through something more, they pursue their quest until they find the light that dispels darkness.

Also, I want to demonstrate, even in fiction, that light can be a solution to problems. It's the principle of the second element from science. You bring in something larger, better, or more evolved and that changes the entire nature of the conflict. You'll see this in each of the books in the series.

**10. Did you consciously put a lot of opposites in the story?** Yes, I believe literature should swing the reader between contrasting values in order to give the fullest range of experience. This can be transformational. I believe I have at least 10 opposite values that run through the book: light and dark; young and old; free and trapped; ancient and modern; forest and factory; seeing and being blind; surface and depth; abstract and concrete; personal and universal; and words followed by pauses in dialogue and description.

**11. What are you working on next?** The second book in *The Light Finder Legends* series is underway. The working title is *The Conch of Bliss*. It will feature new characters on a different quest, facing different problems.