

Evangeline's Heaven: Interview with Jen Braaksma

1. What inspired you to write about angels?

We often think of angels as “good” beings, but is anything in life so clear-cut? I thought of how we often define things as good or evil—it’s common in so many stories—but there’s a lot more nuance than that. Can a person be both? Can a person love someone who does bad things? What does that say about that individual if they do? Lucifer, the devil, is a fallen angel and the epitome of an evil character. But what if there were more to him? And what if someone, say, his daughter, could see only that other side? How would she cope with learning the truth about her father?

As teens, we start to see our parents as real people; loving, yet flawed. It can be hard to accept at times, but it’s also part of the way we learn to see the wider world. Lucifer and *Evangeline* are (extreme) representatives of this struggle. What does it take to truly see ourselves for who we are and not just for who our family is?

2. What’s the meaning of the book?

I teach English. I know how students groan at being asked to determine the theme, the main message, of a book. But every story has one. There’s always a point. It may not be obvious, or you may not agree with it, but every story has an important meaning.

Evangeline's Heaven is about family and identity and being true to yourself. Family doesn’t have to define you. And family isn’t only about those to whom you’re related by blood. It’s about the people who care for you, the people who love you, the people who support you—who have your back, no matter what.

And it’s about recognizing our own value. Teens (and yes, adults, too) often underestimate their own skills and value. They think they need to measure up to the expectations of the world, and they’ll often tear themselves apart in the attempt. It’s hard to accept ourselves and appreciate our own value, but it’s also worth it.

3. Is there a sequel?

Yes, there will be! *Evangeline's Heaven* is the first in a planned trilogy. In the second novel, *Evangeline's Hell*, Lucifer is again threatening the Seven Heavens, so *Evangeline* will have to venture to the UnderRealm to confront her father. Only, she knows he was once an angel who could love, so she believes the path to peace is through his redemption. Her father is more than a monster and for the sake of both the Heavens and the UnderRealm, she’s going to have to prove it—or die trying. The final book in the series, *Evangeline's Home* will take place on God’s new Earth, the place *Evangeline* had thought the Commoner angels were being expelled to in order to become the new humans’ guardians. But as she lands in the Garden of Eden, she meets a serpent with very different plans for Earth—and its burgeoning humanity. How can she save a people she once reviled in a place she never wanted to be against an enemy she never wanted to fight?

4. What's your favourite book?

I wish I knew! The glib answer is “the last book I read”. Honestly, I feel like I *should* know this, but there are too many books I love. A few of my favourites? Lucy Maud Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables series (I’m a proud Canadian!), J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, Erin Morgenstern’s *The Night Circus*, Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, Audrey Niffenegger’s *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Maggie Stiefvater’s The Wolves of Mercy Falls series, to name a few. I also don’t really have a favourite genre, but if you forced me to choose, it would be related to fantasy (high fantasy, low fantasy, paranormal, magic realism, etc.). I love the idea that there’s so much more out there than might be able to see and know.

5. What do you like most about writing?

Coming up with ideas! I find it so much fun to play around in my imagination. I love dreaming up new characters and worlds and settings and stories. And when they’re just ideas, I don’t have to worry about whether they make sense or what logic there is to the story or what all the details are or anything that’s actually necessary for a reader to understand my stories!

6. What do you like least about writing?

Coming up with a plot. I’m always dreaming of ideas and stories and concepts and characters, but *what* exactly happens to them is often blurry. It takes me a while to map out the action—to make sure there’s clear cause-and-effect so the story doesn’t sound too coincidental or convenient—and to make sure the readers stay engaged.

7. What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

First, I’d say don’t call yourself an “aspiring” writer. If you write, you’re a writer! No adjectives necessary. You may still have a lot to learn and you may not yet be published—traditional or otherwise—but that doesn’t mean you’re not a writer. It can be hard to admit that; we’re often in the throes of imposter syndrome (who am *I* to call myself a writer??) but you *can* call yourself a writer. That’s the first step.

After that? Build your confidence as you build your craft. You can read all the how-to-write books you want, and you can take as many writing courses as you can and you can read as many interviews with authors as you like—and I hope you do!—but you still need to believe in yourself as you learn the skills you need. Find someone to encourage you and to cheer you on. It’s easy to get discouraged, so recruit a friend, family member, writing partner or book coach to make sure you don’t give up. When you *do* feel overwhelmed? Call your confidant. They’ll remind you that you *can* do it. If you’re not sure you have someone like that in your life? Send me an email and we can chat.

8. Can you read any of my writing?

My job as a book coach is to do exactly that. I offer manuscript evaluation services, where I read your pages and give you professional feedback on how your story is holding together. If you haven’t started, I can help you find your focus. If you’re in the middle of your work-in-progress, I can help you finish. Check out my coaching website for details about services and pricing: <https://www.jenbraaksma.com/services>