

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHORS OF

# ANOTHER FAUST

DANIEL & DINA NAYERI

*What inspired you to write a novel specifically for young adults?*

**Dina:** We weren't really thinking about the readers' age group when we started (at least I wasn't). We wanted to write a story that explored all the things we desperately wanted when we were teenagers. So first came the teenage characters, and it grew from there. Once we started thinking about it, we realized how universal the desires of our characters are for people of *any* age group. I'm no longer a teen, and I still want many of the same things our characters want.

Plus (and this is probably the *real* answer to your question), as any of our friends will tell you, neither of us has really grown up. And I don't mean that in the way *every adult* says it. It's not that we're "young at heart." It's that we're terminally immature— and we get worse when we're around each other. Once I visited Dan at work and unleashed a chain of events that ended with him angrily quitting his job. Once Dan and I went to Spain, and I ended up on top of a statue. Dan and I still read teen books and watch teen flicks and TV shows. Daniel gobbles up young-adult media like it's his job (which it is), and I volunteer at local high schools. The teenage years are the years we know best. Somehow those were the years that resonated most with our personalities. Plus we have so much fun when we're together. A joint creative endeavor was sort of inevitable.

**Daniel:** Yeah, what Dina said. My first few projects were all YA novels, and I've always been a comic-book and video-game geek. I think the YA genre allows for more creativity. Young readers are willing to suspend disbelief and go off on crazy adventures. For YA books to compete with all the other media out there, I think they have to do what all the other forms can't, which is exploring a story deeper and with more detail and giving us multidimensional insight into the characters.

*How did you divide the writing duties?*

*How would you describe your "all in the family" co-writing experience?*

**Dina:** I love working with Dan. As I've said numerous times before, he is responsible for most of my belly laughs. But it wasn't so fun at first. I was at Harvard Business School when we started (which is not a place you go to write novels, though you *could* get some inspiration as far as deals with the devil go), and Dan was totally immersed in a creative world. We fought *all* the time. We fought so much that I actually consulted the professor of a class titled "Managing for Creativity," which is basically a how-to class for handling nutty creative types. The next time we talked, I was biting my fist every two seconds and spewing lines like, "What *I think* I hear you saying is..." and "How about we just *try* making an outline?"

It took six months of monster fights before we got the hang of things. We learned so much from each other that now, as soon as a fight starts, one of us starts "managing" the other (either Daniel offers to take notes for a change or I agree to go on an Internet joyride through Dan's favorite irrelevant websites), and we just crack up at the ridiculousness of it. Thankfully, we no longer fight over creative content. After all, a person can't be *wrong* about creative preferences. If we disagree on those things, we just have to get off the phone and think about it for a long time, and each person gets to win half the time.

As for dividing up duties, writing with two people is actually a lot harder than writing alone. Plus, we have the whole extra step of outlining the book in painful detail over Skype before we ever begin writing. Before each of our books, we've actually had to spend weeks discussing the voice and the tone (with sample paragraphs and scenes), so that when we begin writing, we can both be shooting for the same mark. Then we divide up the chapters and write a draft, and

each person gets to thoroughly edit the other person's chapter. We do that a couple more times until the voice is smooth. I can't imagine being able to pull it off with a non-family member.

**Daniel:** A lot of our early fights were about trying to create a new method of working on creative projects. I was trying to bring my single-minded approach, and Dina was trying to incorporate "management" methods. Our mom was just trying to keep us from stabbing each other.



**What drew you to adapt the Faust legend for teens? Were there other particular books or sources that you used for research?**

**Dina:** Well, from my perspective, the Faust element didn't come first. The story was originally supposed to be about five gifted teens and a beautiful witch who exploits them. The skeleton of the idea sort of came to me on Christmas Day, 2005, when I was in my second year of business school and starting to realize that I didn't want to have a traditional business career. I wanted to write. So I started to sketch out the characters as five teens who are extraordinarily gifted in various areas, and how they misuse their gifts. I called Daniel, and he and I talked about it for hours.

That January (2006), he came to Boston and spent two weeks living with me, and we outlined the whole book together. When we were discussing the motivation issue (what does the witch want?), Daniel pointed out that Satan would be a much better exploiter of genius. Daniel has studied *Faust* extensively, so he suggested making it a Faustian bargain (which was brilliant!), and we immediately started brainstorming the idea of a series where each book is a retelling of a classic, set at the Marlowe School (the place all literary characters converge in modern times!). Before we came up with a title for the series, we had the horrible working title *Mephisto and the Children*.

As for sources, there are so many literary references in the book. We've quoted Lord Byron, Dante, Goethe (not just quotes from *Faust* but also some of his personal quotes; in fact, we have Goethe as a character in one of our epigraphs). The epigraphs have been inspired by American works such as *Little House on the Prairie* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as well as stories from all over the world, such as those of Hatshepsut the pharaoh-queen, the witch trials in Europe and the Americas, vampire lore, and even wives' tales about the origins of golf. We have characters appearing in the text and epigraphs that include the Romanovs, Goethe, Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Truman, Queen Elizabeth I, and the Persian poet Ferdowsi.

We've also referenced the Bible (there's a major allegorical thread there) and Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown." And of course our school is named after Marlowe, who wrote another version of the Faustian story. We have a couple of references to video games and our favorite fantasy books, such as *Lord of the Rings*. We even used a raging debate that my class at Harvard Business School had about drug patents—ninety overachievers in the angriest debate I've heard in a long time! Fabulous! There are so many layers in the book. That's one of the things I love best about it.

**Daniel:** Don't forget the great film classic *Bedazzled*. And the computer game *Wolfenstein*. And if there isn't a reference to Doc Holliday in *Tombstone*, there should be.

**Are any of the characters loosely based on people you know?**

**Dina:** I hate to admit this, but Victoria is a super-super-extreme version of me when I was in high school. I wasn't as bitchy as she is, but I was seriously obsessed with getting into a top school. I worked day and night with that one goal in mind. Victoria was sort of born out of the realization that I was searching for accolades instead of focusing on real accomplishments. Thankfully for me, my professors, parents, and others made sure I learned the difference eventually, but at the age of sixteen, I had quite a one-track mind. I recently reconnected with an old high-school friend and he reminded me that on the day we got our AP test scores back, I actually said, "Every other perfect score cheapens my perfect score." Wow.

If Victoria is the bad side of me as a teen, Christian is the good side of Daniel. He was a poet and an athlete, and his personality was a lot more reflective, just like Christian's. He also had a hell of a temper (like Christian).

I can't really pinpoint a person that inspired Belle. Belle's desires and fears are what every teenage girl experiences. I remember daydreaming about what I would be willing to give up if I could just look like this model or that celebrity. The exchange in the first chapter where Belle asks, "Would you rather be fat and go to hell or thin and go to heaven?" is something Dan would tease me about when I was on one of my starvation diets (itself a sort of hell when you're part of such a culinary family) .

As for Bicé, Dan and I share her obsession with languages. I remember stumbling home from high school exhausted (because we were both into sports and advanced classes and all sorts of activities) and saying that if we could have one superpower, it would be stopping time so we could get stuff done without losing sleep. I still think Bicé's world sort of rocks. I mean, she's a hermit and has no friends, but come on! Think of how horrible it is when your alarm rings in the morning and you know you can snooze for only thirty minutes, but suddenly, in what feels like a few seconds, that thirty minutes is over. Imagine if you never had to put up with that crap again. Plus, if people called you a freak, you could tell them to piss off in fifty languages. Nice.

Valentin is a combo of about ten guys I had a crush on in high school and college. I'm pretty sure Daniel channeled people he knew as well. I think the guy on the cover is way cuter than any of them, though. Funny enough, Valentin is French. My husband is French. But Valentin is bad, and my husband, Philip, is terminally good.

**Daniel:** Oh, and Vileroy is the devil.

### ***Why do you think teens will identify with the five main protagonists in the story?***

**Dina:** I think that if you could get into my head as a teen, you'd be hard-pressed to find a five-minute increment when I wasn't thinking about one of the things our characters obsess about. In fact, you'd be shocked at how much time I spend *now* thinking about these things. Each of our characters has so much of ourselves and the people we've known in them. Not just desires, but fears, vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and big stupid mistakes. Our protagonists aren't evil. They find themselves cornered at such a young age, seemingly without options. I think it's very easy to relate to that kind of self-created desperation.

**Daniel:** Who wouldn't want the easy road to their dreams? I think everyone is tempted by the idea that if they could just have this or that, they'd be happy. But

Christmas movies have taught us that the long journey to something is often worth more than the destination. And that you'd shoot your eye out if you had what you wanted anyway.

### ***What do you hope readers can take away from Another Faust when they turn the final page?***

**Dina:** I hope they start to see the difference between accolades and accomplishments, as well as what it takes to be *truly* beautiful or successful. But also, I would love it if *Another Faust* were the impetus for readers to pick up the original *Faust*, and if future books in the series inspired readers to read the original versions of those classics as well. Our series is about retellings, but at the end of the day it is also about rediscovering all the wonderful literature that is already available to teens. It's about empowering young adults to add their own mark to the literary world. I hope this series leads readers to experiment with their own writing.

**Daniel:** For me, the number-one goal with this series is for readers to start looking at all the great stories we have in our libraries — *Faust*, *Treasure Island*, *The Book of the Dun Cow*— and stop seeing them as one big unapproachable pile that boring old people call "The Western Canon." All of these stories are there to hang out with, to talk to. If you like *Frankenstein*, cool— write your own version and see how it's different. What parts did you *have* to keep in order for it to stay a "Frankenstein story"? I want young adult readers to come up to me and say, "My *Faust* is better than your *Faust*." That would be amazing. Sure, I'll play you in *Halo*, but what if we teamed up and tried to beat Bram Stoker at his own game?

### ***So what's next?***

**Dina:** We just finished writing *Another Pan*, which is the second book in the series. It takes place at the Marlowe School and has a wonderfully intriguing main character. We've decided to give a nod to every author whose work we re-create in this series by naming some school fixture after them. Since our school is called Marlowe in honor of *Faust*, in book two much of the action takes place in Barrie Auditorium in honor of *Peter Pan*.

**Daniel:** *Another Pan*. Tell your friends.



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