



# Kelly Barnhill on Writing *The Girl Who Drank The Moon*



In Which the Author Finds the Thing She Did Not Expect

The last thing I expected, when I finally began this book, was a volcanic eruption. Or a volcanic landscape. Or volcanoes in general. Still, once I began, there it was. Waiting. Building. Right under my feet. Like it had been there all along.

In a lot of ways, the genesis of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* was similar to the rest of my books—it began with a little knot of text that unwound in my head while I was out for a run. A sentence that pleased me, that stuck in my ear, that carried me, teasing and twisting and winding around my fingers.

And when the knot of text stuck—when it assembled itself into a shape that felt stable and whole—I knew that I had a story worth thinking on.

Here's the thing about novel writing: very little of it is actually writing. Indeed, I have to spend much more time thinking about a novel before ever setting a single word down on the page. I got a box (there must always be a box) and I tossed in quotes and thoughts and sometimes little sketches that are so universally terrible that no one will ever see them. I drew little drawings of a house built into a tree and a swing bed with pulleys to hoist it to the ceiling during the day and a pair of seven-league boots and a devilishly complicated tower.

"Poetry," I wrote on one scrap. "There must be poetry."

"Every witch worth her salt knows that starlight makes excellent baby food."

"The baby is being cute on purpose, in an insidious plot to beguile and distract," I wrote on a notecard, possibly when I was babysitting my infant twin niece and nephew. "What a mean baby."

I knew I wanted a town sandwiched between a dangerous wood and a massive bog. I knew that I wanted a cabal of cynical men who committed an atrocious act year after year for the sole purpose of keeping themselves rich and powerful. I knew that I wanted a Perfectly Tiny Dragon who believes he is ever so much larger than he is. I knew I wanted a baby raised in an odd and haphazard yet loving family. I knew I wanted a girl growing up with magic that she could not control and could not understand. And an overly keen young man, trying to make things right, but getting things terribly wrong. I knew I wanted a sisterhood of lady assassins. I knew I wanted all of these things.

But I wasn't ready to start it yet.

I started writing this book, finally, in a small purple notebook at four in the morning in an un-air-conditioned motel room in Costa Rica during my honeymoon. My husband and I had been married for fifteen years, mind you, but we are slow, and it just took us a while.

I could feel the story begin to feel loud. And close. And insistent.

I wrote the story on my lap, the ink on the paper finding its way toward Xan, the Witch; and Glerk, the Swamp Monster; and Fyrian, the Dragon; and Luna, the little girl at the center of it all. And as I had Xan moving through the forest—with its boiling streams and treacherous sinkholes and shifting rock—I could see it. The volcano. The day before, my husband and I had spent from sunup to sundown hiking and exploring the national park at Rincón de la Vieja, an active volcano. We chatted with the park rangers and marked on the map the places where we were not allowed. "Bad air," the rangers warned. I didn't even know that was a thing. Other points were marked as well. "Thin rock," they explained. "The water is boiling underneath." And over here, they told us, "Sinkholes. Bad news."

We wandered that tricky landscape until the last traces of light left the sky. I went to bed thinking of steam vents and a landscape like the lid of a pot ready to boil over.

The morning I started writing the story, I woke in a fever and wrote in a fever, and the volcano was there, as integral to the story as the girl and her witch and her dragon and her swamp monster. The thing I did not expect. But I think it was probably there all along. Waiting. Building. Getting ready to blow, changing the world forever. I had the story—I could see it—like a bright thread, winding around and around my hands. It had heft and weight and color and promise. I held on tight and began the long, arduous process of following where it led.



**KELLY BARNHILL** lives in Minnesota with her husband and three children. Both her most recent novel, *The Witch's Boy*, and her first, *The Mostly True Story of Jack*, received four-star reviews. Her second, *Iron Hearted Violet*, received a Parents' Choice Gold Award and was an André Norton Award finalist.