

# Alumnus rattles bones with debut novel

On May 10, Harper Collins will publish “Edge of Extinction: The Ark Plan,” a middle grade novel by Laura Martin (VanWeelden) from the class of 2004. Kirkus reviews has praised the book’s protagonist as “a budding Katniss Everdeen—tough, stubborn, [and] resilient. . .—a promising protagonist.” We caught up with Laura, who gave us the inside scoop on her inspiration and the ins and outs of writing books. What follows is an edited transcript of that conversation:

## When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I don’t think there was a moment where the heavens opened, a light shined down, and I knew it was my destiny. Although, that would have been great! However, I was always a reader. Books were magic to me, and I devoured them by the truckload. Eventually, it started to creep into my subconscious that I’d like to create one of these little pieces of magic. So I started jotting down ideas and playing around with writing. When I got to college, I decided to double major in both Education and Creative Writing, and my creative writing classes were far and away my favorite part of the week.

## How long did it take you to write this novel? To find a publisher? Can you explain the process?

I started writing this particular novel over four years ago. It started off as a young adult book, but it morphed into a middle grade adventure novel on the advice of my literary agent. So the original manuscript took a year. It took me a year to land a literary agent and revise it

last two years have been spent splitting my original novel into two novels! As far as the publishing process goes the first step is to find a good literary agent. They are the ones who then take your book to the publishing houses. In return, they get 15% of whatever you make from the sale of the book. In order to land a literary agent you need to write something called a query letter, basically a one-page introduction of yourself and your book. They are wickedly hard to write, and I’ll die happy if I never have to write another one!

## Where did you get the idea for the plot?

All stories start with two words... “what if.” My what if came when I took a trip to New York City with my mom and dragged her to their Natural History Museum. The museum has a fabulous dinosaur display, and those gigantic bones caught my imagination. I couldn’t help but wonder... what if dinosaurs came back? Would we survive bringing our own predators out of extinction? And with that simple what if “Edge of Extinction” was born.

## Does your book have any Christian aspects or in any way reflect your faith?

I reference the story of Noah and the ark quite a bit throughout the story. In the book, the world as we know it essentially has fallen apart and a man stepped up to save what was left of the human race. He fittingly called himself “The

Noah” and called his plan to save the human race from extinction his “Ark Plan.”

## How does your faith affect your work as a novelist?

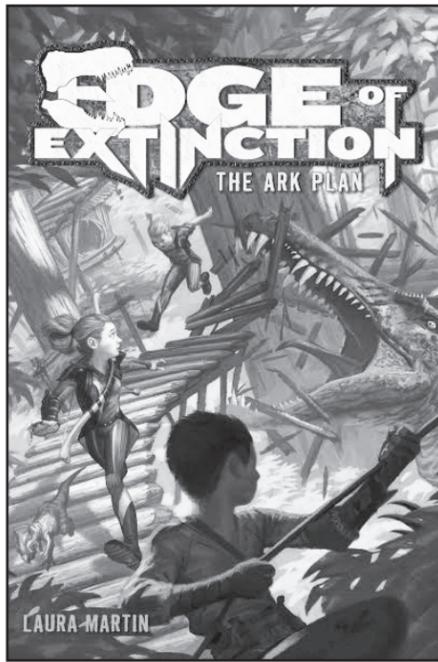
This is a hard question to answer, because I believe our faith doesn’t just affect certain portions of our lives, it molds, dictates, and shapes EVERY aspect of who we are and how we live day to day. So from the stories I choose to write, to the way I conduct myself as an author, a mom, a wife...all of that is a direct reflection of my belief in a God that is mighty enough to make all things possible.

## How did Illiana influence your writing career?

I loved writing, but I hated grammar in high school, and I’d heard horror stories about the amount of grammar work required for Honors English. However, I ended up taking Honors and AP English after a gentle nudge from Mr. De Vries, who pointed out that if I struggled with something, wouldn’t it make sense to take a class that would make me better at it? (Insert forehead smacking revelation here.) So I ended up biting the bullet and taking Honors English followed by AP English. That AP English class allowed me to bypass all of my freshman English classes, and opened up the opportunity for me to double major in Creative Writing. If I hadn’t followed Mr. De Vries’s advice, I’m not sure I’d be an author today.

## Were there any specific classes or teachers that impacted your writing?

I LOVED Mr. De Vries’s class. He made novels come to life, and he really pushed me as a writer. When I became a teacher, I modeled a lot of how I taught off of him. He was truly fabulous. Honestly though, I loved all of my teachers at Illiana, even the ones who pushed me way out of my comfort zone like Ms. Leistra and Frau Westerhof. I could list name after name, from Miss Top, to



Liz Metcalfe, to Mr. Zandstra, Mr. Kamphuis, Mr. and Mrs. Lagerwey...It took entering the teaching world myself to realize how truly blessed I was with the teachers I had at Illiana.

## How did Illiana equip you for life after high school?

Illiana has always been known for pushing its students, and because of that I was more than prepared to face the challenges of the college setting. From the work ethic I developed in the sports programs to the friends that I still cherish today, my four years at Illiana are some of my favorites.

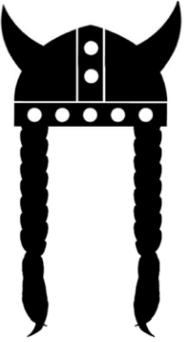
## What did you do to have success in the competitive world of writing?

I wrote. And then I wrote some more. I got a boatload of rejections... but I just kept writing. Edge of Extinction wasn’t the first book that I wrote, and it received its fair share of rejections as well before someone finally said yes. Other than writing, I read a lot. I knew the genre I was writing backwards and forwards so I knew how to craft a story. The last thing that I did that led to my success was research. I spent hours upon hours on the Internet learning everything I could about the publishing world, reading blogs by literary agents and most importantly...learning what not to do.

## What advice would you give students who aspire to be writers?

Be a reader first. You can’t be a writer unless you’re also a reader. My second piece of advice would be to make writing a habit. Try to find time every day to sit down and put something on paper. Writing is just like anything else, the more you do it, the better you get at it. And finally, decide why you are writing. Is it because there is a story inside of you burning to get out? If so, then it won’t matter how long it takes you to find success, you’ll be doing something you love.

## ASK VICKY VIKING



## Crush question causes uncertainty

Dear Vicky,

First of all, I just have to tell you how excited I am to be writing to you. I don’t think I’ve ever written to a real life celebrity before. I know you must get thousands of these letters, but I hope you will be answering mine. Please?! This question was actually from my friend, let’s call him Martin, and I didn’t know what to tell him. I knew I could come to you, though, so I really hope you can help me. Here goes—

If someone asks you if you have a crush, if you say no, is it a lie? Do you have to answer the question?

Thanks Vicky,

Crushed in Crete

Dear Crushed in Crete,

Thank you for this very endearing question! I am happy to take some time to come up with a response for you.

In short, the answer is yes it is a lie, but I don’t think there is anything wrong with avoiding the question. Obviously if you answer the question with a “yes” the follow up will be “Who is it?,” and then you’ve gotten yourself into a very tough situation.

There are many creative ways to avoid this question. For example: “Yes, I have a crush but I’m not telling you who it is.” Or “Stop bothering me.” Or “Hey I think they’re selling donuts at break!” Or you can just run away.

Ultimately, my advice would be that it is always better to tell the truth, but if you’d rather skirt the subject, that’s fine too. Just don’t lie.

I’m sorry you’ve found yourself in such a hard position.

Sincerely,

Vicky Viking

## When obsession makes things awkward

Dear Vicky Viking,

What should I do about a friend that is overly obsessive with his/her significant other? It’s really awkward and it is making our friendship grow further apart.

Freaked-Out Friend

Dear Freaked-Out Friend,

I think the best thing you can do in this situation is to confront your friend. It’s best to communicate how you are feeling to them. They may not know how their obsessive behavior is affecting you. Tell your friend that you miss him/her and feel that you are losing quality time you used to enjoy.

Once you lay out how you are feeling, it is up to your friend to decide how to respond. If your friend chooses to continue the disturbing behavior, you probably aren’t losing a good friend in the first place.

Tell your friend how you are feeling and you’ll feel a whole lot better.

Hope this helps!

Sincerely,

Vicky Viking

Do you need advice? Contact Vicky at [vickyvikingilliana@gmail.com](mailto:vickyvikingilliana@gmail.com) or write a letter and turn it in to Mr. DeVries’s mailbox located in the office. Thank you!

