



Talking to Old People about Jimi & Isaac Books

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Howdy. My name is Phil Rink. My wife Nancy and I are both mechanical engineers and entrepreneurs. We've worked for small and large electronic, nuclear, and aerospace companies, and in the 1990's we developed FISHEYE Underwater Video Cameras. Our cameras were used on almost every television fishing show and they revolutionized the salmon farming industry. Since then we've invented and developed products for ourselves and for other companies.

One of the things I've invented is a video game that cures cancer. When you play my game you play as your own immune system and medical treatments. You deliver the drugs to kill the cancer. You create white blood cells to fight infection. You stitch fibers together to build new bone. If the storytelling is strong enough, a properly designed video game can be so immersive that there will be real changes in your body's response to disease.

And that's why I hate video games. If you read a good book about playing soccer, you want to go outside and play soccer. If you go outside and play soccer you get fit and you interact with actual people, and when you make a good pass or score a goal, your body rewards you with a shot of endorphin that makes you feel better and makes you want to play more. When you play video game soccer, you get the same endorphin rush but none of the benefits that come with actual activity. We want our kids out slaying the real dragon to save their real town, not fake dragons and fake towns inside a video game.

Another issue is that the world is changing in unpredictable ways at ever-increasing speeds. Kids will need to constantly invent their own lives. They can't follow their parent's footsteps, and parents can't necessarily plan a future for their kids. But we can tell

them foundational stories that give them a place to stand while they build their own future selves.

Kids have wildly skilled storytellers constantly pushing and pulling them into deciding what shoes to wear, what cars to drive, what to believe and how to behave. Most of the time, the kids don't even notice it's happening. As parents and teachers and society we need to help them recognize when they're being manipulated and give them the tools they need to formulate their own viewpoints. We need to tell them better stories.

Strong readers have plenty of material to choose from, but many kids need easy to read books that are still worth reading. These books were common when I was growing up – Beezus and Ramona and Henry Huggins, Nancy Drew, The Mad Scientist's Club, and of course the classic Tom Swift books.

My daughter and I would try and read things together when she was younger. She'd bring books from school but often the books were disappointing. Even if they were fun to read, they were about people dealing with other people, and especially about people being mean to people. We're more interested in people building and fixing things. Then she brought home "Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen. She was really excited for me to read it, because she loved it and she knew I would, too. But when she looked for a similar book to read next, we found that Hatchet was all alone. There really wasn't anything similar.

In 2001/2002, when our kids were nine and twelve, we took them on a sailing trip through the Caribbean. As part of that trip, we made a book and video for families that might want to follow us. Writing that book made me think that maybe I could write a book to sit on the shelf next to Hatchet, and I put the story together on our drive home from Florida. It took me the next eight years to learn how to plot and write a book correctly.

Since then I've written four more books. The five books follow Jimi and Isaac from the week before the start of middle school until the first day of High School. All of the books are crammed full of science and art and music and real ideas and facts buried and woven into an exciting story. It's all about plot, plot, and more plot. What Jimi and Isaac do is much more important than how Jimi and Isaac feel. The books are unashamedly inspirational and aspirational.

School Soccer covers the transition from parent-coached recreational soccer to school-sponsored competitive soccer. It's about soccer. Lots and lots of soccer stuff. The kids learn the difference between competition and conflict, and the importance of individual effort and team cooperation. It also begins the conversation about art and change and growth and fitting in and not fitting in.

Keystone Species is based in the Pacific Northwest and deals with the real-life issues of environmentalism, environmentalists, and the difficulty in deciding who to trust and figuring out what to do. The boys have some big problems to solve. Not getting dead, for instance.

Mars Mission and Solar Power are straight-forward books about middle school boys that create a successful Mars probe and revolutionize the solar power industry. Really they're about music and sports, with some science and inventing and business and dealing with

jerks and dealing with being a jerk.

The Brain Injury is a brutal book about a difficult subject. Most of us have had to deal with someone we know and love getting a severe head injury. It's particularly difficult for Isaac, because he's never had a real problem in his life he couldn't solve. But now he can't make his Dad better, he can't even find out if his dad will get better. The uncertainty is impossible for Isaac to accept. There is nothing more adult than having to live with unacceptable options.

Part of learning how to write books is learning how to sell books, and we've learned a lot. Mostly what we've learned is that the publishing industry is tiny and homogeneous, they cater to the 10% of the population that buys 90% of the books, and they don't think boys read. Since boys don't read there's no point in publishing books for boys. At my third year at the major annual publishing conference in Seattle, an important agent recognized me and my books, and asked me why I wouldn't take the hint and go away. So I did, and now Nancy and I concentrate on self-publishing and self-marketing the books.

I wrote "Mermaid," the book about our sailing trip, in 2002. Back then self-publishing was pretty complicated. You had to work with an actual printing company and spend up-front money to print actual books. Self-publishing is almost trivial now. Once the book is completely written and edited and formatted, I can get it published and available world-wide in just a few hours for zero up-front cost. Books are printed and assembled as they're ordered. The process is so easy that the market is now flooded with books of varying quality. Some are completely horrible. It's very difficult for people to wade through the sheer volume of books. It's very difficult to get noticed.

When we started this whole book thing there was an almost complete firewall between self-publishing and traditional publishing. In 2015 we were finally able to get Brain Injury, our most recent book, reviewed prior to release. Kirkus gave the book a "Star" review and later selected it as one of it's 100 best "Indy" books of 2015. Since Kirkus is a well-respected review company, we've gotten a big boost from this recognition.

Our business goal is to get Jimi and Isaac books into the Scholastic Book fair. Not only is this where kids find and buy books, but school libraries use their sponsorship money to stock their libraries from the same source. It's a closed ecosystem, and we need to get picked up by a major publisher to be included. In the meantime we're working to sell enough and generate enough buzz to get drafted to the big leagues. We're doing as many school talks and groups talks as we can find. We have a facebook page that's pretty good and I network on LinkedIn. Nancy has done a great job getting us into somewhere between 200 and 300 libraries nationwide, but many libraries, like our own Sno-Isle library system, won't even consider purchasing self-published books.

The publishing industry is focusing on "diversity," which they define as stories with different racially different protagonists, culturally different settings, or written by non-white authors. Jimi and Isaac books are wide-ranging, racially agnostic stories about different interesting topics. As kids build interesting lives, they'll interact and intermingle. The cultural and racial differences will fall away. Jimi and Isaac books aren't illustrated. The only images that matter are the pictures in the reader's mind. I want a world with massive amounts of cultural appropriation and cross-pollination.



So, I hope everyone has a business card. On the front is all the business stuff, including our website where you can find all the books and read all the reviews and press reports about the books. On the back is the key to success in any endeavor. This is the fun part of talking to kids. It's fun to watch the lights go on. For any problem, you simple start somewhere. You either try something, or you think about what to do first, then you try something. Once that doesn't work, you think about what to do next, then you try that. The key, of course, and where most people fail, is that you have to pay attention to what you're doing the whole time. You have to notice when things aren't working. You have to see where improvements can be made. Also, you're never done. You always fall short. However, you may discover as you reflect on what to do next that you've done enough here and it's time to move on.

Also, everyone else is you come in contact with is working this same process. They're trying and failing and trying again. We're all in the same boat. Get on with it. Think and do while paying attention. Easy.

Phil Rink is a [Professional Engineer and Inventor](#), and he writes [Jimi & Isaac Books](#) for Kids