

Janae Marks' debut novel ***From the Desk of Zoe Washington*** (ISBN 9780062875853) arrived earlier this year, and has received four starred reviews! Ms. Marks has an MFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in Writing for Children from The New School. She grew up in the suburbs of New York City, and now lives in Connecticut with her husband and daughter. Get to know her below.



Q. This is your debut novel, so would you share your writing process with us (Do you write daily? By hand or via computer? Times of day when writing comes most naturally?)

A. My process has changed and evolved over the years. When I started writing *From the Desk of Zoe Washington*, my daughter was only a few months old, so I wrote in the early mornings and during her naps. I do most of my writing on the computer (I love the Scrivener writing software) but I also like to write by hand when I'm stuck. I don't write every day all year round, but I try my best to when I'm on deadline!

Q. The themes in *Zoe Washington* are so inspired and relevant. Can you speak to any specific cases of wrongful conviction that helped you to tell this story?

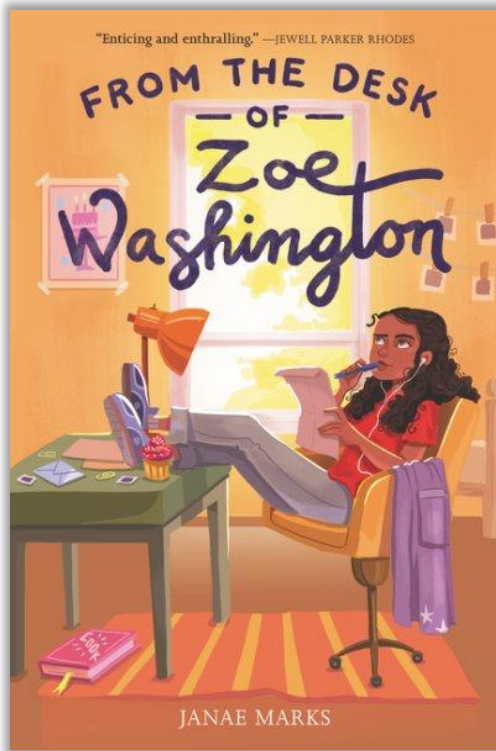
A. Well, there were two cases that first got me thinking about wrongful convictions – Adnan Syed's case was covered in the first season of the podcast *Serial*. I also became interested in the case from the Netflix documentary *Making a Murderer*. Neither the podcast nor the documentary was able to prove whether or not these men were truly innocent, but they sparked my interest in this subject. I started researching the Innocence Project, and read about the convictions they'd been able to overturn. I used that research to develop the details around Marcus's case in the book.

Q. There's a lot of great music in *Zoe's* life; is music an important part of your day, and are you able to listen to it while writing? Who are some of your favorite musicians?

A. I've always loved music, and I was even in singing groups in high school and college. When I'm writing, I like listening to ambient music without lyrics. My favorite playlist is the Focus playlist on Spotify. In general, I like a wide variety of music, and lately I've been listening to a lot of Broadway musical soundtracks.

Q. At what point did you decide that *Zoe's* story was solidly a middle grade one?

A. I actually started writing the first draft as a young adult novel. But early on in the draft, one of my critique partners told me the story sounded more like middle grade. I immediately switched gears, and I'm so glad I did because it feels right in this category.



Q. Is there one character in *From the Desk of Zoe Washington* who you relate to most?

A. I don't have a parent in prison, but I relate to Zoe in a lot of other ways. I, too, had big dreams when I was Zoe's age. When I was twelve, I thought I wanted to be on Broadway. I also had conflicts with friends in middle school, like Zoe experiences with Trevor. I'm also an only child like Zoe!

Q. Who have been some of your favorite writers throughout your life?

A. There have been so many! Within middle grade, I love Jewell Parker Rhodes, Rebecca Stead, and Sharon Draper. Of course, J.K. Rowling has had a huge impact. As a child, my favorite writer was Ann M. Martin. I loved the *Babysitter's Club* series so much, and I even wrote her a letter once!

Q. If you had just one piece of advice for your audience relating to Zoe's experiences, what would that be?

A. Follow your heart. In her baking and in finding out the truth about Marcus, Zoe trusts her instincts. This works out for her in more ways than one!