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# City of Ember

BY

Jeanne DuPrau

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# SUMMARY

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Lights shine in the city of Ember—but at the city limits the light ends, and darkness takes over. Out there in the Unknown Regions, the darkness goes on forever in all directions. Ember—so its people believe—is the only light in the dark world.

And now the lights of the city are beginning to fail.

Is there a way to save the people of Ember? No one knows. But Lina Mayfleet has found a puzzling document, and Doon Harrow has made discoveries down in the Pipeworks. With these clues, they start their search.

From Jeanne DuPrau's Website  
<http://www.jeanneduprau.com/books.shtml>  
Accessed 11/4/05



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jeanne DuPrau spends several hours of every day at her computer, thinking up sentences. She has this quote taped to her wall:

*"A writer is someone for whom writing  
is harder than it is for other people."  
—Thomas Mann*

This gives her courage, because she finds writing very hard. So many words to choose from! So many different things that could happen in a story at any moment! Writing is one tough decision after another.

But it's also the most satisfying thing she knows how to do. So she keeps doing it. So far, she has written three novels, six books of non-fiction, and quite a few essays and stories.

Jeanne DuPrau doesn't write every minute of every day. She also putters around in her garden. She lives in California, where it's easy to grow everything from apples to zinnias.

Jeanne DuPrau doesn't have children, but she has two nephews, a niece, and a dog. The dog lives with her. His name is Ethan. Jeanne and Ethan get along well, though their interests are different. Ethan is not very fond of reading, for example, and Jeanne doesn't much like chasing squirrels. But they agree on walks, naps, and trips in the car to surprise destinations. Ethan also likes to help in the garden.

From Jeanne DuPrau's Website  
<http://www.jeanneduprau.com/about.shtml>  
Accessed 11/4/05



# BOOK REVIEW

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## Editorial Reviews

**Booklist Review:** Gr. 5-7. Ember, a 241-year-old, ruined domed city surrounded by a dark unknown, was built to ensure that humans would continue to exist on Earth, and the instructions for getting out have been lost and forgotten. On Assignment Day, 12-year-olds leave school and receive their lifetime job assignments. Lina Mayfleet becomes a messenger, and her friend Doon Harrow ends up in the Pipeworks beneath the city, where the failing electric generator has been ineffectually patched together. Both Lina and Doon are convinced that their survival means finding a way out of the city, and after Lina discovers pieces of the instructions, she and Doon work together to interpret the fragmented document. Life in this post holocaust city is well limned--the frequent blackouts, the food shortage, the public panic, the search for answers, and the actions of the powerful, who are taking selfish advantage of the situation. Readers will relate to Lina and Doon's resourcefulness and courage in the face of ominous odds.

(Reviewed April 15, 2003) -- Sally Estes

**School Library Journal Review:** *Gr 4-7*—DuPrau debuts with a promisingly competent variation on the tried-and-true "isolated city" theme. More than 200 years after an unspecified holocaust, the residents of Ember have lost all knowledge of anything beyond the area illuminated by the flood lamps on their buildings. The anxiety level is high and rising, for despite relentless recycling, food and other supplies are running low, and the power failures that plunge the town into impenetrable darkness are becoming longer and more frequent. Then Lina, a young foot messenger, discovers a damaged document from the

mysterious Builders that hints at a way out. She and Doon, a classmate, piece together enough of the fragmentary directions to find a cave filled with boats near the river that runs beneath Ember, but their rush to announce their discovery almost ends in disaster when the two fall afoul of the corrupt Mayor and his cronies. Lina and Doon escape in a boat, and after a scary journey emerge into an Eden like wilderness to witness their first sunrise—for Ember, as it turns out, has been built in an immense cavern. Still intent on saving their people, the two find their way back underground at the end, opening the door for sequels. The setting may not be so ingeniously envisioned as those of, say, Joan Aiken's *Is Underground* (Turtleback, 1995) and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (Houghton, 1993), but the quick pace and the uncomplicated characters and situations will keep voracious fans of the genre engaged.—*John Peters, New York Public Library* (Reviewed May 1, 2003) (*School Library Journal*, vol 49, issue 5, p148)

Novelist  
Accessed 11/4/05



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Doon and Lina like very different things. Doon wants to work in the Pipeworks; Lina yearns to be a messenger. Doon likes to study how things work. Lina likes to run and explore. But their friendship grows because they are ultimately searching for the same thing. How do they complement one another and help one another develop through the novel?
2. Earth today has many environmental and social issues. What sort of problems could have led to the building of the City of Ember?
3. Clary tells Lina, “Everyone has some darkness inside.” (p. 168) Light and color both play very key roles in the novel. In what ways, other than the failing street lamps, is color and light important?
4. The possibility of never-ending darkness changes many of Lina’s friends and many of the townspeople. She discovers that her friend Lizzie has begun to accept things from Looper, who is stealing things from the storerooms. Why does Lina turn down the gifts that Lizzie offers her? Do you think that she was right to do so?
5. The city of Ember was built when people were worried that the human race might not survive. Do you think this was a good plan?

6. The mayor is the most corrupt character in the novel. He squelches the thirst for knowledge and limits freedom, yet the majority of the townspeople just accept his behavior. Why do you think they act this way? What other actions might they have taken?

7. People react in various ways when they feel threatened. How do the people of Ember react to danger? Have you seen people reacting to danger in these ways? How are Poppy's actions important to the plot?

8. At the end of the novel, Lina, Doon, and Poppy have discovered a sunlit earth. What do you think will become of them in the sequel? Do you think that there are other people on the surface?

Random House  
<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780375822735&view=rg>  
Accessed 11/4/05



# AUTHOR INTERVIEW

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## An Interview with Jeanne DuPrau

**I know you've written several novels and nonfiction books, but can you tell me a little bit about your background? Have you always been a writer - did you also have other jobs to help pay the rent? Do you write fulltime? How did you get started writing for children/teens?**

Most of my jobs have had something to do with reading and writing. I was an English teacher for a while, then an editor in educational publishing, then a tech writer for Apple Computer. After I left that job (now nearly 15 years ago), I did various kinds of freelance writing. I've written four books of non-fiction for young people, a memoir about my experience with meditation, and lots of other non-fiction, including book reviews, magazine articles, and essays. I never wrote much fiction before *Ember*—just a few short stories.

I'm not sure how I got started writing for children. It just seemed the natural thing to do—partly, I suppose, because I'd been a teacher and worked in educational publishing. But mainly I think my mind just works that way. It seems more natural to me, and more interesting, to write a story about an underground city than to write a long, complex story about grownup problems.

**How did you get the idea for *The City of Ember*? Did you sell the book yourself, or do you have an agent? How long did it take to find a publisher? After you had a contract for the book did you have to do much rewriting?**

I'm not sure how the idea for *Ember* came to me. It probably had a lot to do with growing up in the fifties, when we did bomb drills in school and people built bomb shelters in their back yards. I've always been very aware that we human beings have the ability to obliterate most of the life on the planet. But I did not consciously sit down to write a story with this in mind. It was more as if the city of *Ember* simply appeared in my imagination.

I sent the book to an agent, who accepted it right away and sent it to several publishers. Quite a few were interested, so my agent did an auction, and Random House won. I don't remember how long this took—I think my agent accepted the book in January and it was sold to Random House in September. I didn't have to do much rewriting at all.

What's a typical writing day like for you?

I usually work in the morning. Some days I work from about 9 until noon or 1. I might do some more in the afternoon or the evening, or I might not. I don't have a rigid schedule. If I can write a thousand words a day, I'm happy.

**In *The City of Ember*, you did such a wonderful job of creating a credible world without the sun or stars or many other things we take for granted every day. What was the hardest part of developing that world and the characters in that book?**

Developing the city didn't seem hard to me. I enjoyed imagining how it looked and how it would work, and drawing the map of it. The characters weren't very hard, either, once I got them started and knew who they were. The hardest part for me was the plot—figuring out what would happen next, how one thing led to another, how to keep the action and surprises going, how to get the timing right, how to lead up to the ending.

**Are there any books about writing and publishing that you have found to be helpful in learning to write well for children/teens?**

In the middle of writing *Ember*, I got overwhelmed by how hard it was to write a novel. It was a much more enormous project than I'd expected. One book that helped me was *Stein on Writing*, by Sol Stein. He gives some very plain, sensible advice about writing fiction.

**Since there will be a sequel to *The City of Ember*, did you plan on that from the beginning, before finishing the first book? If so, how much outlining and plotting did you do from the start - before writing either book?**

I did not plan to write a sequel to *The City of Ember*. I had never written a novel before—I didn't even know if this one would be published. A couple of reviewers have said that the end of *Ember* is a blatant setup for a sequel, which bothers me a little. I had no thought of a sequel at the time.

As for outlining and plotting—it would have been easier to write both books if I'd done more of it ahead of time. I did some. But I find it impossible—and undesirable—to outline a plot in detail before I write. A great deal of the plot evolves as the writing goes along. It is good to know, though, where I'm going to begin, where I'm going to end, and at least a few of the things that are going to happen along the way.

**What is the most difficult part of writing for you?**

Sitting down every day and facing the blank page.

**What do you enjoy most about being a writer?**

Having written a first draft that has potential, and then going back over it to make it good. Also—a new thing for me: getting e-mails from readers who have liked my book. This is really wonderful.

**What tips do you have for writers just starting out, trying to break into the world of children's publishing?**

I have no tips about breaking into children's publishing. I think the main thing is to be a good writer—and I mean by that someone who writes a lot, knows all the rules of writing, knows the difference between good writing and bad, can write clearly, has interesting things to say, has a sense of structure, is willing to work hard—there's SO MUCH that goes into being a good writer! If you're a good writer, and if you were an avid reader as a child and can remember what you loved about the books you read, I think you have a good start.

**What are you working on now? How do you stay motivated to keep working on a project when things aren't going well?**

Right now I'm working on revisions to the sequel to *The City of Ember*, and soon I will be revising another book that I've just sold—this one for slightly older readers, a contemporary story about a boy and a car. After that, it will be time to start on something new. I have a few ideas just starting to come together.

When things aren't going well—when I'm stuck in the middle of a book, for instance, or when I'm starting to doubt that what I've written is ever going to be any good at all—I find various things helpful: 1) going on a long walk with my dog; 2) lying down to think (usually I think for a while, go to sleep, think for a while more); 3) read a writer I admire; 4) give up temporarily and do something entirely different, such as work in the garden.

The main thing is to keep struggling along, remembering that there are always hard parts, and that I usually get through them sooner or later.

Interviewed by Suzanne Liaurance  
[http://www.wordmuseum.com/childrencolumn/\\_children/00000006.htm](http://www.wordmuseum.com/childrencolumn/_children/00000006.htm)  
9/24/03



IF YOU LIKE...

*City of Ember*

by Jeanne DuPrau,

*you might like the following books, too!!*

*Off the Road* by Nina Bawden

*The White Mountains* by John Christopher

*The People of Sparks* by Jeanne DuPrau

*Among the Hidden* by Margaret Haddix

*The Giver* by Lois Lowry

*Gathering Blue* by Lois Lowry

*The Last Book in the Universe* by W.R. Philbrick

*River Rats* by Caroline Stevermer