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Seven on Seven: A Conversation with the Writers of Orca Book Publishers' Series

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In his will, the adventurer David McLean arranges for each of his seven grandsons a different task that takes him to locations around the world. *Seven the Series*, published by Orca Book Publishers, brings together the boys' stories, and the work of Canadian young adult writers Eric Walters, John Wilson, Ted Staunton, Richard Scrimger, Norah McClintock, Sigmund Brouwer, and Shane Peacock. Founded in 1982, Orca Book's main warehouse and editorial offices are based in Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. The independent publisher has brought numerous Canadian writers to global attention. Since its publication, over 100,000 copies of *Seven the Series* have been sold. In what follows, the seven writers share with us their views about the project, their writing processes, their child characters, the larger aims of their individual novels, and how they fit into the larger project. For synopses of the seven books, please refer to www.orcabook.com/seventheseries. The series continues with *The Seven Sequels*, which will be published on 1 October 2014.

Eric Walters (2012), *Between Heaven and Earth*

Thank-you for this excellent novel and this truly ambitious series! How did it come into being?

I was sitting around – actually in my hot tub – talking to my wife about a child fulfilling a dying request of his beloved grandfather. From there, I wondered about his brothers and cousins and if they all had different requests made. Like most writers, I have favourite writers and wondered how they would follow this story line. This was the beginning of the series.

Why tell seven stories?

There is something magical about seven. It seemed like a large enough number without being too large.

Why focus on seven boys?

Reluctant readers are often male. There is a myth that boys don't like to read. What they don't like to read is books that are not directed toward them. I wanted this project to be directed to those readers, to offer them a series but with a difference – different writers with a variety of different genres.

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You have recruited some of the most beloved Canadian children's authors for this project. Tell us about your selection of writers.

I wanted writers who could write for a male audience – not that females won't be interested in these books – but boys are a much harder 'sell.' I also have to admit that part of it was simply that I chose writers who write books that I like ... and are nice people. If you're going to work with a bunch of people, it's always ideal to choose people you like!

Did you communicate significantly with your colleagues in your writing?

There were numerous meetings, telephone calls, and an email group where we'd exchange ideals and keep each other informed about what we were writing. In addition, I finished my book fairly quickly as a template for the scenes around the will. Then, with their feedback, and the need to accommodate their stories, I rewrote sections.

What led you to tell the story of the eldest grandson?

It's funny how in many cases the characters we chose to write seemed to be pretty related to who we are and what we do. My character is a real take charge, A-type personality, and I think that pretty well reflects me. In some ways, having created the idea, I felt like it seemed appropriate that my character was the eldest grandson – although he's only moments older than his twin brother – the character written by John Wilson.

Tell us about your research.

In the summer of 2011, I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. I had already written the part of the book right up until he started the climb. From that point on, I wrote as I actually climbed the mountain. I took notes, pictures, and videos. In the rest periods, I'd be jotting down ideas and actually writing – by long hand – scenes from the book. There's nothing more inspiring than acting out the scenes that your character will encounter. I did this in 2010 (walking 200km across the Sahara) to write *Just Deserts*, and in 2012 (150km across Kenya) to write *Walking Home*. I'm planning next year's adventure and book right now!

To be real, it is so essential to experience the things that your character experiences. I'm starting to think that I'm a 'method writer.' So much of what DJ experienced, I experienced. I was even clear that if I couldn't summit then neither would DJ. When you follow his course up the mountain, you are seeing through his eyes a lot of what I experienced through my eyes ... and legs, muscles, and bowels. That summit day was the hardest day of my life.

This novel charts the story of DJ's climb as much as that of his personal development. At the start of the novel, we get a real sense that his knowledge of Tanzania stems from stereotypes – for instance, he suspects that the custom guard wants a bribe and his vocabulary owes principally to The Lion King. What attracted you to tell the story in this way?

I'm always shocked about the 'knowledge' most people have. It is such an incredibly diverse, amazing place that both defies as well as defines stereotypical thinking. It actually is pretty easy to come across a government official who

wants a bribe, but in general you are dealing with people who are proud, honest, struggling, and striving to make their way of life. Having been in Kenya so often – and running a whole children's programme – I have been blessed to see more of the 'real' and less of the stereotypes. I truly believe that we are all Africa – that is where we started on this planet – and the dust and dirt get under your skin in a way that makes you want to return 'home' again and again.

In the novel, DJ learns about the history of Tanzania's independence. Tell us about your research.

Colonialism left deep scars and deep divisions that still have far reaching consequences. The people whom I have met are moving beyond this, seeing the past as an explanation, but not an excuse, for failures and laying the groundwork for success. Tanzania – like Kenya and most African nations – is relatively young. They continue to struggle through their pasts but are moving forward rapidly.

What, in your view, can we learn from this history?

My time in Africa is almost exclusively experienced in Kenya. The continent is so diverse, so expansive and full of so many cultures that it's hard to generalise without sacrificing the nuances that make each country different. What I am constantly amazed by in Kenya is the ability of people to take whatever good they have or are offered and make it even better. People are looking forward, looking for opportunities to better themselves and their country. There is a sense of community, purpose, faith, and commitment to family that we could certainly learn from. I work through my programme (www.creationofhope.com) to help the orphans of Kenya. I leave at the end of each summer wondering if I'm giving to them nearly as much as they've given to me.

DJ communicates with his twin brother Steve and, indeed, Steve encourages him in the final steps of his climb. Did you work this out with John Wilson?

John is my good friend and a wonderful writer. We decided that our characters would be brothers and then filled in the gaps from there. By necessity, I had more contact with John than anybody else in the series.

What do you hope readers will take away from this book? From this series?

I hope they will think that my book – and the rest in the series – are good reads, lots of fun, and page turners. As always, I think that story is everything.

Along with that, I hope they'll get a sense of the importance of family, doing the right thing, and the continuity of life. Climbing Kilimanjaro with my son is one of the most memorable experiences of my life and it was wonderful to share it with my readers.

John Wilson (2012), Lost Cause

Lost Cause makes an interesting contrast to Between Heaven and Earth though it centres on DJ's twin brother. What led you to focus, in equal parts, on Steve's and his grandfather's stories?

I wanted the story to be both contemporary and historical. I write historical fiction and saw the grandfather's will as a perfect opportunity to bring a mysterious past to light. On the other hand, the seven stories have to focus on the modern boys for consistency – therefore, half-and-half.

The novel begins with a mystery story – indeed, Steve is a reader of Agatha Christie – but quickly moves away from being one. Tell us about your choices with genre.

I needed something at the beginning to intrigue Steve and draw him into his grandfather's request and, while his quest is not a mystery in the traditional sense of the genre, it is a journey of discovery for Steve, both of the present and the past.

We get a fuller picture of DJ's and Steve's family in Heaven and Earth. Did you decide this with Eric beforehand?

No, basically all we collaborated on in detail was the way the relationship was expressed through the texts. Having Eric explore the family more gave me the freedom to make the past more of my story.

What led you to tell this story in Steve's book and not DJ's?

Even before Eric and I decided to make Steve and DJ twins, I wanted my character to be the black sheep of the group, the one who didn't thoughtlessly admire his grandfather. When we made them twins, the characters were already there, at least in our minds, and were useful for illustrating that aspect.

We get many more conversations between Steve and DJ in this book, but not in DJ's. Tell us about this choice.

There are two types of conversations between Steve and DJ. Face-to-face early on and via text later. The former are to establish Steve as the black sheep of the family and to prefigure how his relationship with his brother will change. It was also a way around repeating a lot of the family stuff that is covered in DJ's book. The latter, in both style and content, are designed to show how the relationship between the two boys changes as both face challenges and learn.

Tell us about your research for Lost Cause.

The Spanish Civil War has been a fascination of mine since I was a teenager in Scotland. I have read extensively, so had much of the background information already. Specifically, I reread about the Battle of the Ebro and used Google maps to follow the route I have Steve follow when he's reading his grandfather's diary. The research during the writing was mostly done online. For example, the streets of Barcelona and the stories that Laia tells Steve were based on my time in Barcelona (not specifically to research this book), Google maps, and websites I discovered.

Why focus on the Spanish Civil War?

We wanted the stories to be set worldwide. Others were doing Canada, Eric wanted to set his story in Africa, I love Spain and the history of the Civil War – simple!

What, in your view, can we learn specifically from this period in history?

That history is always more complex than we think or than the books tell us, and that the decisions, moral and otherwise, faced by historical characters were just as complex as the ones we face today.

Like DJ, Steve inherits a beret, one which might have come from Ernest Hemingway. One of the puzzle pieces that Steve's grandfather leaves him is a part of a poem by W. H. Auden, and we learn of George Orwell's participation in a fight. Tell us about your use of literary references and what they contribute to your project.

Much of what we non-Spanish speakers know of the SCW comes from very literary sources, Auden, Orwell, Hemingway, etc., and I wanted to bring this out in the story. I often have the fictional characters in my books meet real literary characters and they are often poets (e.g., Isaac Rosenberg in *And in the Morning* [the title of which finds inspiration from Rosenberg's poem 'God']). It's partly something I enjoy doing and partly I hope it will encourage readers to discover writers and/or genres that they might not otherwise be introduced to.

Intriguingly, Steve's grandfather, like him, is running away from boredom. Do you see this as an essential part of the adolescent experience?

Absolutely. If not essential, certainly very common. The teenage years are a sort of limbo between the simple complexity of childhood and the real complexity of adulthood, and I think the boredom inherent in not being allowed into either world often leads to extreme behaviour, e.g., running away to war, sea, or to find fame and fortune.

How, in your view, has this changed between Steve's grandfather's time and his?

To be honest, I don't know. Certainly, teens grew up faster in the 1930s and were considered adults at a younger age than today, so the time for this boredom would have been shorter, although not necessarily any less intense for that. The other factors in Steve's grandfather's time were the Great Depression (many adults went to Spain out of desperation – or boredom – with the social and political world they lived in), and the grandfather is also coming off an intense experience and probably wanting to escape, although I don't go into this. What teens experience at any time in history is a major theme in almost all my fiction and I am still exploring it.

As the novel unfolds, Steve seems to achieve a greater understanding than his grandfather did when he was young: while Steve's grandfather recognises the proliferation of political slogans, Steve and Laia come to realise the very human losses that come with his grandfather's politics and they witness this more fully in their visit to Pablo Aranda. Do you see this as a turning point?

I think Steve's grandfather realises more than the political complexity in Spain. He sees, brutally, the consequences of the decisions he has made (shooting the man on the hillside). The difference between the two is the times they live in. The grandfather realises the cost of his decisions, but that does not mean that the decision is wrong and he goes on to fight in WWII for many of the same

political reasons that he went to Spain. Because Steve's perspective is modern and he does not have the political motivations of his grandfather, he has to go a step further than his grandfather, hence the meeting with Aranda to underline the complexity of the past. In my other novel set in the SCW, *Lost in Spain*, I do something similar about my character's and his father's pacifist beliefs.

One of the most interesting aspects of the novel is that some of the outcomes are revealed to us long beforehand: we know that Steve's grandfather will live through the Spanish Civil War though his mission fails and that, with the help of the diary, Steve will uncover this story. Tell us about the challenges of writing in this way.

This is both a challenge and a benefit and is sometimes inevitable in historical fiction. (My novels set during the Franklin expedition to the Arctic had to deal with the fact that many readers will know that no one survived.) Even if the survival of one of the major characters is in doubt (something I have used in books, e.g., *And in the Morning* and *Shot at Dawn*), it is not enough to carry the whole story and so minor surprises/mysteries along the way have to be included to keep the reader moving along. The final outcome, then, often becomes a device for shock value: in *And in the Morning* the reader expects the main character to survive and he doesn't (sorry for the spoiler). The great benefit of knowing the outcome is in creating an emotional connection with the main character. If you know he's going to die, that presents many opportunities for pathos, irony, etc. If you know he's going to survive, how is he going to manage that? I suppose I don't really see this as a challenge, but perhaps that's just because I've always written historical fiction.

The implications of Steve's discoveries are quickly revealed when he helps DJ complete his task. To what extent do you see DJ's mission as being Steve's?

I don't, other than they are both going through similar, teenage learning experiences. As far as I'm concerned, Steve's helping DJ is a way of showing how Steve's attitude to his brother has changed and matured.

Ted Staunton (2012), Jump Cut

Jump Cut nods to so many genres, including the road novel. What inspired it?

Jump Cut was inspired first and foremost by Eric's challenge to come up with a character and an adventure that fit the premise of the series. After a trilogy of tightly plotted comic novels about the same group of kids in a small town, this was a chance to break out into a broader, larger-than-life adventure – and to get on the road. I'd always wanted to write a 'road' book / picaresque, but my previous characters were too rooted. This was my chance.

Tell us about your research into Jackfish and cottages.

After I came up with Spencer needing to get a kiss from an ancient movie goddess, I needed a place for them to head to. For about a minute and a half, Spencer was going to go to Ethiopia, because I know it a bit and Eric had demanded exotic locales. Unfortunately, Eric had already staked out Kenya, so

I had to look elsewhere. Jackfish was suggested to me at a New Year's dinner by an artist friend who rides his motorcycle across Canada every summer. He'd been there, had photos, and directed me to a website about the town. If I couldn't get them to Ethiopia, I figured Buffalo, New York, and a ghost town north of Superior were the next best (or worst) places.

Cottages were easy. The cottage they go to is a dead ringer for one belonging to an old family friend. We're invited for a weekend every summer, but I justified last year's visit as research.

Film is central to Jump Cut. What led you to narrate the novel partly through screenplay?

The screenplay narratives aim to serve three purposes. One is to give us a glimpse of how Spencer's awakening imagination works. Like all of us, he filters a bit of life through the strainer of culture that he's experienced. The last bit of screenplay though, is more a documentary transcript of what he finally ends up making – and it's about real life. He's progressed. A second is to reinforce the difference between book and film. The third is it seemed an easy way to goose the action even more. If I can't actually write in a plausible car chase scene with helicopters, rocket launchers and motorcycles with machine guns, why not have him imagine an implausible one?

The novel alludes to numerous films. Tell us about your research into films.

I didn't do any research at all, just drew on my own varied viewing experiences. I'm not particularly nostalgic for older films, though making Grandpa David's list up (which didn't make the cut for the book) was fun. As I get older I find myself drawn more and more to 'small,' character-driven films, like, say, *Winter's Bone*, rather than sensational, screen-burning blockbusters, thus there are some astonishing gaps in my current film viewing. I bet if I went and saw a couple of extravaganzas though, I'd really like them – unless there was a lot of blood splattering.

For what it's worth, Grandpa David's list (excluding the films of Gloria Lorraine) comprises: *City Lights*, *Dawn Patrol*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Harvey*, *Monkey Business*, *Double Indemnity*, *Casablanca*, *Sons of the Desert*, *The Thin Man*, *The Music Man*, and *The Great Escape*. These are in no particular order, certainly not chronological. While many of these are favourites of mine, I thought he'd be a fan of these for sure.

What, in your view, is gained and/or lost in film in comparison with prose writing?

I don't know that there's anything gained or lost between film and prose; they're just different. It's tempting to say subtlety gets chopped out of film versions of prose, but film has its own subtleties. There's a famous anecdote about someone, William Faulkner I think, writing pages of brittle dialogue to show a husband and wife quietly detesting each other at breakfast. A screenwriting colleague replaced it all with a wordless bit of business in which she loudly rattles a coffee cup and he lowers the newspaper just enough to glare at her.

Repeatedly in the novel, you show us how the real world works differently from the ones that we experience in films. As Spencer recognises, gangster films rarely have happy endings, but your novel ends with a very promising one. Was this purposeful?

The 'happy' ending is, I'd prefer to think, 'bittersweet.' I hope if one reads between the lines the implication is clear that Gloria has died sometime before, and that Spencer's brother Bunny is in jail for whatever *he's* gotten up to. As well, I think the ending is appropriate. Spence has grown through this experience, which is what his grandpa intended, as has AmberLea. In general, too, I think that books for young people should end with at least a ray of light shining into whatever darkened room there might be.

Tell us about your communication with Richard Scrimger, who wrote the story of Spencer's brother Bunny.

Richard Scrimger and I talked through the characters of Bunny and Spencer, their family, and where they lived (which Richard then changed), and loosely agreed that the two would keep in touch, as would we. I got my story going and finished first and fed Richard the material where my plot demanded the characters be in touch with one another. Richard had a million things on the go and forgot to read a bunch of this first go round, but he's a pro and apparently worked in the one key scene where Spencer and Bunny talk on the phone without much difficulty. (I say 'apparently' because I never saw what Richard wrote. He finished way after me.) The two stories fit together without much effort – even when he told me, after my story was done, that he'd sure like it if I could make it a day longer. There are ways ... I also had to write Bunny out of the last scene in the Jackfish graveyard after Richard decided fairly late on, I believe, that he had to go to jail.

All in all it was fun; Richard is a good guy to bounce ideas around with, especially ones that are a little bent. Thus our brothers are the guys who feel a little out of the loop: Bunny has to get a tattoo, Spencer believes for a while that Grandpa has staged his whole adventure because he thought Spencer too wussy to have a real one. The other cousins get the *real* adventures.

One day when I see Richard's book, I'll find out how well it all worked out. I still haven't read a word of his story.

In Eric Walter's and John Wilson's novels, we get a real sense of the lessons that the boys' grandfather wants to teach them. What, in your view, does Spencer's grandfather want to teach him?

I think Spencer's grandpa wants him to engage with the world, to grasp that watching and doing/creating are interdependent. First, someone has to create what we watch: they have to *do*. Second, that doing of course shapes the reality or story. But most important, what really counts at either end is trying to understand. Neither doing nor watching is of great value if we don't try to understand what's engaging us. And of course, when you try to do that, you find stories everywhere. Without reflecting, neither has value in the end.

Or, it could easily be something entirely different and I've missed the point entirely.

Richard Scrimger (2012), *Ink Me*

What led you to have Bunny write most of his story in retrospect?

All stories are really in retrospect, aren't they? But if you mean, *why did I start the start after Bunny's arrest instead of leading up to it* – I like to grab the reader and say, *Hey, Listen Up! This is going to be interesting*. I figure the trade-off in suspense (you know what is going to happen) is worth it for the gain in excitement. Also, it gives me as a writer a place to go. I know I have to get Bunny to the police station.

What, in your view, would have been different if we were to experience the story through Bunny's thoughts but not his writing?

To me, form and substance go together. The way a story is told is as much a part of it as the events themselves. An omniscient narrator could relate the events of Bunny's story and give a sense of his character and feeling, but the immediacy would be gone.

Bunny is quite complex as a character. He likes SpongeBob and yet he is a skilful storyteller and he can be quite mature at times, particularly in his dealings with Jaden. Tell us about your creation of this character.

First off, SpongeBob is not a simple cartoon – it's almost existential at times. But I know what you mean. I took a bit of Bunny from one of my daughter's school friends – a challenged kid who was part of her class from grades 1–8. He didn't have close friends and he didn't read or speak well and never learnt long division, but he would go up to a bully-type situation on the playground and say, *don't do that*. And kids listened. He had a kind of (cheesy phrase) inner wisdom.

Bunny's and Jaden's parents are either emotionally or physically absent. Do you see this as a trigger towards gang formations?

Very much so. Among other things, gangs fill an emotional void – they offer a sense of belonging, a group identity is often lacking at home.

Bunny's grandfather triggered his adventures though he seems to have much less control on them than he did on Bunny's cousins'. Tell us about this choice.

I did not want this to be a grandpa-driven story. I give Bunny a few special moments with grandpa, in flashback, but the story plays out on its own. Of course grandpa is a wise old owl and the thing he wishes for Bunny – to find a crew, be part of something larger – does in fact happen.

At times, there seems to be a kind of rivalry between Bunny and DJ. Tell us about this relationship.

Eric is a hilarious guy, classic type-A, bossy-pants, go go go. I like him a lot but I also like laughing at him. I knew the kind of character he would write about, and I figured that that character and Bunny wouldn't have much in common.

Bunny's story dovetails Spencer's nicely. Tell us about working with Ted Staunton.

Ted and I are good friends, and it was a fairly easy fit. His story took a mob turn early on, and I worked to incorporate my plot into his. My story took an extra day in the weekend, and he had to find a way to stretch his out. We both wanted to make sure that the stories were stand alone as well as interwoven.

Bunny's experiences seem much darker than Spencer's. Was this purposeful?

Not really. It's the way we write. All my books have comic elements overtop of darkness. In this case, Bunny's condition and character didn't seem right for slapstick. The story grew organically.

In the previous novels, we get more of a sense of the lessons that the boys' grandfather wants to teach them. Do you see Bunny's story as a move away from these earlier stories?

Not on purpose. And, like I said, there is a sense of the old man pushing Bunny (maybe inadvertently) towards a sense of community, belong, that he wasn't really getting at home. The gang is Bunny's parallel family, and Jaden is his parallel brother (with a twist).

Norah McClintock (2012), Close to the Heel

What led you to begin this story in medias res?

I knew at least one book – Eric's – was opening in the lawyer's office, and I wanted to open mine with something different.

Structurally, the novel brings together a number of intertwined mysteries. Tell us about your approach.

Rennie was sent to fulfill a mission given to him by his grandfather – that was the set-up for each of the seven books. But I love mysteries, particularly murder mysteries, so I wanted Rennie to stumble on a mysterious death while he was in Iceland and to be in a position where he tried to figure out what happened.

The novel makes an important allusion to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart.' Were you working towards this throughout the novel?

Not at all. At least, not consciously. But for sure Einar is haunted by what he knows and where he has buried his secrets – and Sigurder is troubled by what he has seen.

Tell us about your research into Iceland.

Iceland – what a country! A true geological wonder with its volcanoes and glaciers and hot spots, not to mention its placement over a rift zone. One of the things I discovered rather quickly was that large glaciers, like Vatnajökull, create their own weather systems, and that people who stray or who chance the elements sometimes get into big trouble. Then I read an account of two men who got lost in a flash blizzard as they attempted to retrace their grandfather's journey through the interior of Iceland. Then it was off to the races, so to speak.

Rennie is the grandson most removed from the others. Did this mirror your working relationship with the series' other writers?

As I understand it, some of us worked in isolation from each other (e.g., Shane Peacock, Sigmund Brouwer, and I), while others were more team oriented and had made their characters brothers (Eric and John, and Ted and Richard).

Like Bunny, however, Rennie has physically and emotionally detached parents: his mother has died and Rennie sees his father as 'a "military Yoda"' (208). Do you see this as a part of the adolescent experience?

Rennie's mother's death, in which Rennie played a part, has definitely thrown him for a loop. He can't stop blaming himself. His father, never terribly demonstrative, is also suffering from the loss, in his case, of the one person who could reach him emotionally. So we have two males in pain – and not dealing with it well. That hits Rennie the hardest, of course.

Close to the Heel repeatedly gestures towards economic crises and, indeed, it plays an important role in David's mystery. Tell us about your research.

The economic forces of the world form part of our environment whether we recognise it or not, or whether kids recognise it or not. Iceland was hit pretty hard. It didn't seem right not to mention this, and it gave some impetus to the situation that one of the murder suspects was operating in.

Do you agree with Karl's assessment of the correlations between limited opportunity for children and increased crime?

I think there is a relationship between the two, although I do not think that poverty in and of itself causes crime. But, for example, give a kid a single mom working two jobs or, perhaps, doing her best on social assistance, an absent father, an environment that includes 'alternative' father figures or family formations, such as gangs, and limited parental oversight, and I think that kid has a better chance to run into some difficulty than, say, a kid with two involved parents, a stable family life, oversight, and a positive environment at school and in the community.

As in Bunny's story, David seems to have limited control over Rennie. Was this choice purposeful?

David didn't even know Rennie existed until some months before he died. That was certainly deliberate. My character is the outsider in the family. It's not even clear whether or not his mother knew who her real father was. We can only guess.

The novel culminates with Rennie conversing with his father. What, in your view, precipitated this change in both characters?

I think that Rennie's 'close to the heel' experience naturally brought out the love that an astute reader would have seen that Rennie's father has for him, despite his tough-as-nails, disciplinarian stance. As for Rennie, he has done something positive. He has been on the right side, which is not something he could have said for himself earlier in the book. I also like to think that in his journey, he

was able to see that his father's discipline and toughness contributed to his own determination to keep going, no matter what the odds.

How important do you see it in relation to the novel's many mysteries?

I think Rennie's positive view of himself at the end of the novel represents real growth for himself. Is this as important as the mysteries? I think the unravelling and resolution of the mysteries gives Rennie some insight into other people and their problems and/or weaknesses as well as his own. For sure, the whole adventure is something he will never forget. But my guess is that many years hence, when he may reflect on what happened, he might think: (a) I can't believe I survived that, and (b) it hurts and sometimes it doesn't seem right, but people can survive all kinds of things.

Sigmund Brouwer (2012), Devil's Pass

Webb is a single child just like Rennie from Close to the Heel. How did this affect your working relationship with the other writers?

Aside from a couple of meetings with Eric, I didn't know the other authors, except by their works. This, I think, is a geographical thing, as I hadn't spent much time in Ontario where most of them live.

Our working relationships – and friendships – began after the series was published and we had a chance to tour together, and I've really enjoyed getting to know them.

As for the writing of *Devil's Pass*, Webb's isolation made it very natural not to have to worry about what the other characters were doing, so he was able to proceed without knowing anything of what they did.

Did you find yourself being as lonely as Webb in your writing?

Happily, the short answer is no. I write at home and my office door is always open and I enjoy the chaos of the household with my daughters, who are 12 and 9.

So much of Webb's story is revealed through delayed decoding. Was this decision informed by Webb, who is very much a private character?

I usually go by the seat of my pants, without really knowing the story when I begin. In essence, it means I discovered what was happening as Webb was making the same discoveries. It wasn't until the story was nearly complete that I realised, for example, the symbolic parallel between Brent and Webb's stepfather.

Tell us about your research for Webb's journey to the Canol Trail.

I've been to the far north many times, visiting schools in the isolated communities to help kids with literacy, and I love the beauty and vastness of it. I drew on my travels, but I also made a couple of specific trips to Norman Wells to learn more about the Canol Trail. The story of the building of the pipeline, to me, is fascinating, and I marvel that this part of Canadian history is

not better known. The museum in Norman Wells has what is likely the most complete details about the Canol pipeline, and I drew heavily upon that. As well, the book is dedicated to the biologist who has walked the length of the trail and was a valuable resource to make sure the details are accurate. I share this research at www.devilspassnovel.com.

Tell us about Webb's musical tastes.

Not surprisingly, much like mine. Old time rock-and-roll! Webb is the first character that I know of in a novel who actualises his music aspirations by getting his own songs on iTunes. Readers can go there and look for his band: mile oneTwelve. Webb names his band for the mile marker that revealed the big secret in the book, and under that band name, Webb has four songs on iTunes. Readers can also go to www.devilspassnovel.com to see the music video with Webb in it.

To what extent do you see music as a particularly useful medium for teenagers like Webb to articulate his adolescent experience?

Great songs, like great stories, make us feel something. And when we have difficulty articulating our emotions, the emotions can be conveyed through music.

There is very little of Webb's mother in the novel, and she seems very passive as a parental figure. Tell us about your decision.

It was simply a decision to focus on the story of the quest given to Webb by his grandfather. The length of the novel could have been double if the story would have included more of the mother, and her apparent passiveness.

Webb does not blame his mother. Why do you think that is?

If that part of the story would have been explored, we would have discovered the hold of the stepfather over the mother, and how Webb understood this on a conscious and subconscious level.

Brent is in many ways similar to Webb's stepfather. Also a bully, Brent has monopoly over Norman Wells. Do you see the community as being responsible by letting Brent become the criminal that he is?

This is an extremely complicated question about an extremely complicated issue. The legal means to prevent possible abuse are so limited that again and again we see tragic stories about victims, especially women, who look for protection and aren't able to get it. It seems, however, collectively we are beginning to have the willpower to do something about this issue, and, like the long pendulum swing that finally began to stop abuses of drinking and driving, I'm hopeful we'll see results against bullying.

To what extent does the adolescent have the agency to make a difference?

The best answer I can give is that it is always going to depend on how the adolescent makes choices. Webb's response to fight the monster is one way, and maybe not even the best way, but I think it was honest to his character and his

situation; we can hope that as a society we make it easier on troubled adolescents to get help and choose to seek it.

Shane Peacock (2012), Last Message

October 2012 is a particularly exciting month for you with the release of both the final book in The Boy Sherlock Holmes series and your contribution to the Seven series. Are there connections that you see between these two writing experiences?

Yes, and no. The *Seven* series had a template that was not of my own creation. Eric Walters came up with the basic idea – that a grandfather has asked his seven grandsons to complete seven adventures on his bucket list after he dies – and my story, all the seven stories, had to evolve from that. So, in a sense that is somewhat like *The Boy Sherlock Holmes* in that I was working to a degree from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's template with it. But, for some reason my Holmes story felt a little more my own than the *Seven* venture did. Perhaps it was the fact that I was creating a Holmes that came BEFORE Conan Doyle's, while my *Seven* series contribution was about a character that came AFTER Eric Walter's initial idea. I felt some need with *Seven* to conform to a certain style and stay within the family (of stories), as it were, while with Holmes, strangely perhaps, I never felt constricted. I felt like my Holmes, despite the many connections I made to the original, adult guy, was totally my guy. I was REALLY in his head.

You nod to Holmes on one occasion and, to some extent, through the scientist Mermoz. Were these allusions purposeful?

I think I was just having fun with my reference to Sherlock in *Last Message*. It was sort of a little connection that I thought readers of the other series might enjoy. And it fits too, of course, or I wouldn't have done it. Concerning Mermoz, that character may be like Holmes in terms of his ego and (self acclaimed) intelligence, but his name actually comes from one of Antoine de Saint-Exupery's colleagues, a famous French flyer named Mermoz who was a member of the Aeropostale gang and died an untimely death, like St. Ex. He was a much more admirable guy than my Mermoz! In *Last Message*, I have a bit of fun with stereotypes of the citizens of certain countries, of Americans of course, which runs through the novel, but also of the French, and Canadians. The novel is about a kid who isn't really a very nice guy through most of it, someone trying to find himself, someone trying to NOT be a stereotype, but a real person who lets his heart guide him instead of his insecurities, his material concerns, and superficial views of things.

Did you feel particularly responsible as the contributor of the series' final story?

I didn't see it in that way. In fact, at a publicity event the other day, we seven authors were surprised to hear that there actually WAS an order to the books. I think we have seven endings to this series and they all happen simultaneously. In fact, that's one of the things that is powerful and unique about this endeavour – it is like a cubist sculpture, and you can walk around it and see

the same object, same family and group of cousins/characters in this case, from different angles. Now, if mine were to truly be considered the ending to the series, I think it would work just fine. All the grandsons are trying to find themselves, as kids their age do, and Adam certainly has a revelation at the end of *Last Message*.

Adam differs from the other cousins in the series by being the only American. Tell us about your decisions here.

I think when you do a project like this you always want your character to be unique. The best characters are like that, and you are always trying to find a way to convince yourself that your character is real and different, as human beings all are. This was one way to do that. But also, I wanted my character to feel like an outsider. His main problem was one of self-esteem, which made him a bit of a jerk at times. He was worried that he was different. So, I made him different right off the bat. But he learns that that is OK. He learns that it is just fine to just be yourself, as long as you value the right things. Also, I wanted to take a poke at modern materialism, which is often associated with the American way of life. The United States is a wonderful country, one of the greatest to ever grace the earth, but it has also led our world in believing that material gain is what matters. My character has to learn that that is NOT what matters. Having him be an American, with American ways, was perfect.

As with Rennie and DJ, there seems to be some kind of rivalry between Adam and his older cousin. What led you to suggest this backstory?

I didn't really set out to create that situation, though it certainly is true. But that is simply because Adam sees everyone as a rival, and DJ is the perfect grandson of the seven. He is the one who sees himself as a leader and almost the moral pilot (no pun intended) for the others. Adam would immediately resent that, and the fact that I could point that out helped to delineate exactly who and what my character was from the outset.

Instead of one adventure, Adam has three. Why did you structure his quest in this way?

That's because I'm a cheater. Just kidding, but in a way it's true. I cheated kind of like my character would, to get more attention than the others! But the real heart of why I did that has to do with a dynamic that I'd noticed in kids' video and computer games that also connects to basic interests that all human beings have. In many kids' games these days, they have to achieve something (often a certain number of kills!) in order to get to a higher level, then they have to achieve more to get to the next etc. I thought it would fit with kids' instincts and interests to have a story where my character gets three envelopes and a small one, like a prize at the end. He has to accomplish the adventure set out in the first envelope before he is allowed to try the one in the second and on up. Only when he completes all three can he open the ... last message. That structure appeals to human beings generally and it is part of the whole dynamic of narrative in any kind of story, a sense of moving forward, of progress, of growth. It mimics the growth that my character achieves too. And,

of course, it creates drama, and hopefully a need and desire to turn the pages, too.

Tell us about your research for Adam's quests.

I often tell young writers that they should write about the things about which they are passionate. All I really did with Adam's three quests was turn to three things that absolutely fascinated me – Vincent Van Gogh's life and work, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's life, work, and disappearance, and the amazing Chauvet Cave and its timeless art. I had been reading a great deal about all three of those things, so I had the information I needed. I had just read the Gregory White Smith and Steven Naifeh monumental biography of Van Gogh and was fascinated. I was intrigued by the fact that all three of these interests had origins in the same region of southern France and it came to me that I could put them together and that Adam could learn a great life lesson from these amazing men and art.

Adam inherits his grandfather's ability to tell stories. He reflects: '[T]he key to telling a dramatic story is the pacing. You can't give your listeners all the candy right off the bat. You have to dole it out bit by bit, making the payoff even better and better, until you get them to the story's climax' (47). Do you agree with this view?

Absolutely. And that is kind of what happens in *Last Message* itself. Now, there are a million ways to tell a story, but there are also certain things about story telling that you cannot veer far from, if you want to be effective. Of course, this also goes to Adam's cynicism. He likes to sort of 'work' people during the first part of the book, when he isn't a very nice guy. Story telling can be used for good ... or evil!

Does this hold true when one is writing or contributing to a series?

I think so. A series is a group of stories, but it is also a very long, connected story as a whole. *The Boy Sherlock Holmes* is paced a certain way within each novel, but it also has a pace to itself as an entire series. It speeds up, slows down, promise things, takes them away, creates secrets, makes you wonder what will happen next, even in the next book ... and then reveals most of the answers at the very end, in *Becoming Holmes*.

Adam's parents are more available physically than many of the other cousins' though they do not participate in his quest. What led you to place them in France?

It was simply where I wanted my adventures to be. The Van Gogh, St. Ex, and Chauvet Cave stories were there, so Adam had to be there too. However, I was adamant, when asked to write for this series, that I was going to get my character the heck out of Canada and somewhere somewhat exotic. I didn't want this series, by Canadian authors, to simply take place in Canada. I felt we needed to make it go places, just like the grandfather did. I actually encouraged the other authors to do the same. The grandsons ended up in France, Spain, Iceland, the US, all over the place, which I think made the series even more effective, and gave it a wonderful sense of really exploring the minds and souls of our young characters, but also of the world. I felt that

Adam's parents, given that he was just 16 (though nearly 17) needed to be nearby for my story to be believable. They were always just a text message and a few kilometres away.

What, in your view, finally led Adam to return the painting?

He looked inside himself, finally. When he saw that the final message from his grandfather was an empty envelope, he realised that the important things in life weren't material, but invisible, inside you. He couldn't articulate it, but he knew it. He had it in him all along. His grandfather, who truly loved him, knew that. Some readers may feel that he was a terrible jerk through much of the novel, and I intentionally took a chance with him and made him kind of shallow, at least apparently, but if you read carefully you see that he always had kindness within him – in the aid he gave to the boy, Leon, in the wheelchair, in his moments of bald self-criticism when he was doing something he shouldn't, in his sense that his loving, kind-hearted girlfriend was really who was best for him. In the story, he simply learns to accept that those things are what really matter.

Is Adam's grandfather too demanding in his requests?

That's a good question. He is pretty demanding with Adam. But remember, he never says that Adam **MUST** accomplish even one of the requests. He simply throws them out there, to see what his grandson can, or will, make of them. Adam realises, in the end, that all the requests were really about the first one – simply giving the painting to the poor French family, admitting fault, doing the right thing. There was, in the end, no need to be manly and brave and do all these amazing things, and accomplishing them would just bring him material happiness, which doesn't matter. He simply had to have the courage to admit that he wasn't treating others the way he should in his young life, and that his grandfather had done something morally wrong all those years ago in France too.

Do you see Adam as a better man than his grandfather for doing what he has failed to do?

Maybe. And maybe that was what his grandfather wanted to give to him in the end – the idea that he, Adam, was worth as much or more than even his great hero, if he learned to do the right thing, or simply to bring out the heart within himself. But a grandfather who would admit to his foibles, admit them to his own grandson, and be willing to sacrifice his own reputation to make his grandson a better man ... is a pretty amazing man too.

Why show this flawed aspect to the boys' grandfather?

We are all flawed, and those who think they aren't are the most flawed. A man who can admit to his weaknesses is a very strong individual. That is an important lesson for a boy, a male. And besides, I felt, sometimes, that the grandfather in the series as a whole, was a bit too goody-two-shoes for me. I wanted to make him real, a little secretive, and intriguing.

What do you hope that readers will learn from your ending to this series?

I am a huge fan of *The Little Prince* and what it had to say. I think it is magical. You can live by it. Its message is the same message as *Last Message*. We live in a very materialistic world, led by the American way of life. As I said above, my character was American for that reason, as well as others. He was the son of high achievers, materialistically, and felt his grandfather was a great person because of all the acclaim he had. Value, in the past and especially now, it seems, too often comes, from the world's estimate, from being the richest, having the best looking spouse, the biggest house etc. Our kids get caught up in that and think that those things are what really matter. But inside, we all know that isn't the case. As St. Ex said: 'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye.'

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Although Ue specializes in nineteenth-century literature, he cares deeply about, and writes on, many aspects of intellectual history. His work has appeared in a number of journals including the *Journal of Gender Studies*, *The Gissing Journal*, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, and *Variants: The Journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship*, and he contributes to *Film International* and the *TLS*. He is editor of *World Film Locations: Toronto* (Intellect Books, 2014), which coincides with the city's 180th anniversary, and *Dictionary of Literary Biography 377: Twenty-First Century British Novelists* (Gale, 2015). He is concurrently at work on a shorter piece on photography and phonography and their impact on the forms of late-Victorian and Edwardian writing. This is an opportunity to do some preliminary work towards a monograph on legal theory and the British novel in the nineteenth century.

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