

"To heighten our awareness of humanity"

Interview with Morris Gleitzman, author of *Boy Overboard*

Kaye Tucker
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Morris Gleitzman, author of Boy Overboard, a children's novel based on a fictional account of the journey of Afghan child refugees [See: Nurturing a sense of fairness and humanity], spoke with Kaye Tucker last month about his work.

A well-known prize winning writer of children's literature, Gleitzman was born in England in 1953 and immigrated to Australia in 1969. Some of his best-known books include: Two Weeks with the Queen, Misery Guts, Worry Warts, Puppy Fat, Blabber Mouth, Sticky Beak, Belly Flop, Water Wings, Bumface, Gift of the Gab, Toad Rage, Adults Only and Toad Heaven. He has also co-written two successful novels—Wicked! and Deadly!—in collaboration with Paul Jennings.

Kaye Tucker: Could you explain how you became an author of children's books?

Morris Gleitzman: I was a freelance writer for 10 or 12 years. I produced a wide range of material, mostly television comedy, including the *Norman Gunstan Show*, for a few years. Generally I wrote for adults but then authored a couple of family movies—*The Other Facts of Life* and *Second Childhood*—for the Australian Children Television Foundation. A publisher asked me to turn these into books so I thought I'd give it a go and enjoyed it very much. In fact, it seemed to be the type of writing I'd been looking for. So I wrote an original novel and it took off from there.

KT: What's the difference between writing for children and adults?

MG: Apart from the obvious genre considerations on the nature of the story and the way one writes, the most important difference for me is personal. The television films were the first things I'd written that were my own stories and the first time I'd written stories where the main characters were about 11 years old. This struck a powerful chord and I realised there was a part of me that had been looking for the chance to express itself through the voice of 11-year-olds. Not only do I have an endless stream of stories but this sort of writing feels right for me. I can't explain why but when you find it, you know.

KT: What inspired *Boy Overboard*?

MG: It really started in late 2001 when almost every night on television we started to see asylum-seeker boats and that developed into the "children overboard" controversy. Two things struck me. First I began to notice there were plenty of children on these boats and like any other parent, I wondered what it must be like to take your family on this sort of journey. Then I went one step further and started entering an imaginative world in which I tried to put myself in their place.

I didn't know much about this world but I started to look more closely at the television and newspaper reports. I noticed that more and more political pronouncements were being made about these asylum seekers, the intent being to deny that these were actually people—human beings. This shocked and appalled me but then I realised that I had access to something that could serve as a small antidote to the way politicians were behaving. I have always believed that stories, if they're well told, will heighten our awareness of humanity, not diminish it.

KT: What was the next step?

MG: After I decided to write the book, I realised it would need lots of research. But I postponed meeting people who had personally experienced this sort of journey because I didn't want to get caught up in their individual stories and end up trying to write a piece of reportage, which I am not equipped to do. I did a lot of secondary research—reading and watching documentaries and current affairs programs—then I wrote my story. Although there were lots of gaps with regard to life in Afghanistan and the physical experience of undertaking the journey, I filled in some of this intuitively. When the first draft was complete, I was fortunate enough to be put in touch with a family who had four children, a couple of them with similar ages to characters in *Boy Overboard*, and they agreed to read the manuscript and then helped me with much of the practical detail.

KT: What's been the response to the book?

MG: It's been good. My books are used a lot in schools and often there is real sensitivity to the subject matter. In

fact, I've written books previously that slightly disturbed some teachers.

Although *Boy Overboard* was explicitly more political than anything I'd ever written, I've been really pleased to see that it has been largely embraced and put on Year 7 reading lists in the high schools. Usually a book has to be around for a couple of years, because teachers need time to get used to it, but *Boy Overboard* was only published six months ago.

I was also very pleased with the review on the *World Socialist Web Site*. Books for young people don't get much thoughtful commentary and reviews tend to be little more than a few token paragraphs. It was a pleasant experience for me to find someone who actually talked a bit more about one of my books and had the space to write about it.

KT: Could you elaborate more on the media response to refugees and asylum seekers?

MG: Even though there is still a reasonably diverse range of viewpoints and positions expressed within the media in Australia, I'm very disappointed with their response. Because the media exists primarily to attract views to a particular channel at a particular time, it is inevitably attracted to conflict—to issues that can be expressed in simplistic high-profile terms. While there have been many voices pleading for tolerance, the media regards this as inherently undramatic. What's more dramatic for them is the notion of difference, of implied conflict and danger. Whether it is a consciously held view or not, the media decision-makers often behave as if fear will attract larger audiences.

I've also noticed a similar trend in the reporting about the approaching war in Iraq and I am very saddened to see a palpable relishing by the media of the prospects of war. For the media, on any given day, it is better if Australia is at war, than if it isn't. War is a great news story as far as the media is concerned and I've noticed that Channel 7 has created a new timeslot for the war and is selling advertising space for it as we speak.

KT: A key feature of the international antiwar protests has been the participation of youth. What do you think about this?

MG: I talk a lot to young people—mostly in primary schools—because the age group I write for is between 10 and 13-years-old. Young people have keenly developed moral perceptions and are able to take strong and morally informed positions on a range of basic questions, including the imprisonment of the children of asylum seekers in detention centres. Although I don't have much contact with older teenage students, I note with pleasure that they are prepared to take a day off school to make their views felt about war.

It's good to see that they are still prepared to risk raising the ire of their parents.

KT: Writer Phillip Gwynne recently commented that most adult fiction authors in Australia seemed unwilling to address the contemporary political issues explored in "Young Adult" literature. What's your opinion?

MG: I agree with Phillip up to a point. But rather than saying there should be more politically-driven adult literature, I would like to see less ironic, emotionally-detached, cool writing. In our culture over the last couple of decades there has been the development of what I call the Tarantino effect. More and more of our culture has a distancing effect, where irony is ever present.

The basic elements of human experience are being written about, but in a way that safely sets the viewer or reader apart. Irony faithfully isolates us from having to become emotionally involved in the messy, contradictory, complex business of being human. It's almost as if a lot of writing, and a lot of filmmaking as well, has said, "Look we sense our readers and viewers don't want to mess with this stuff anymore". They would rather stay cool, detached and ironic.

I'm really pleased that a lot of writing for young people is still prepared to deal with the messy contradictory stuff, but beyond that I don't wholly agree with Phillip. Sometimes writing tries to focus readers onto specific social issues and processes. At other times, and equally legitimately, it helps us explore and understand what it means to be human.

Although a lot of my work has looked at social problems and questions, I think of myself primarily as a humanist. What interests me most is writing about young people who aren't afraid of grappling with problems. I like to explore the ways in which people struggle against things that can't be totally overcome but finds ways of not being crushed.

Hollywood, in fact human culture going back millennia, has always thrown up heroes who have an absolute mastery over whatever problems they are grappling with. You know that they are going to be victorious in the end. This, however, is not the experience most people, and certainly not young people, have. I guess I've tried to champion a different type of hero, one that is heroic because they don't give up.



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