

Writing for Kids

Young readers love the stories and characters created by author Mark Delaney.

Flip through today's young adult section in your bookstore or library—or take a look in your child's backpack—and you may make a shocking discovery. These days, what passes as literary fare for the Hardy Boys-and-Nancy Drew set rivals the bleakest adult fiction. Impressionable youngsters often delve into tales that present worst-case scenarios, offering little or no redemption.

Darkness begone, proclaims Mark Delaney. The Centerville author, a teacher at Hickman High School, pens stories rife with conflict and peopled by realistic characters. Yet Mark's books, aimed at late middle school and early high school youngsters, still manage to win a G-rating of approval from grown-ups.

Sunny Side of the Page

"There is a lot of darkness in young adult literature today," says Mark. He shrugs. "I didn't want to do that. Every single book of mine has to do with redemption. There will be darkness, but the sun has got to break sometime."

Reared in California, Mark is the second oldest of eight children. "My parents are still married," says the author, who declines to write books with "stupid grown-ups" as plot devices. "Mine was a happy family. What's really tragic is that that's alien to a lot of kids. The two approaches are to write a really dark story with which the readers can identify. Or you can give the reader a place to go, a place where they can put themselves in a more wholesome environment."



Mark Delaney draws from his experience as a high school English teacher to pen young adult literature.

He chose the latter for his successful mystery series, *Misfits, Inc.*, and his latest novel, *Pepperland* (all published by Peachtree Publishers, Ltd.).

Relating to Outsiders

The *Misfits, Inc.* books—six in the series so far—center on four teenagers drawn together because of their outcast status. Together, they solve a different mystery in each volume, using the same talents or abilities that make them pariahs among the popular.

"It's reaffirming for readers to see someone their age who gets made fun of by every student but actually turns out to be very competent," Mark says.

In the books, Peter is the designated leader. His razor-sharp reasoning and observational skills eerily determine facts about people and situations almost instantly. Peter's keen insight, however, only solidifies his reputation as a weirdo. Eugenia, nicknamed "Byte" for her

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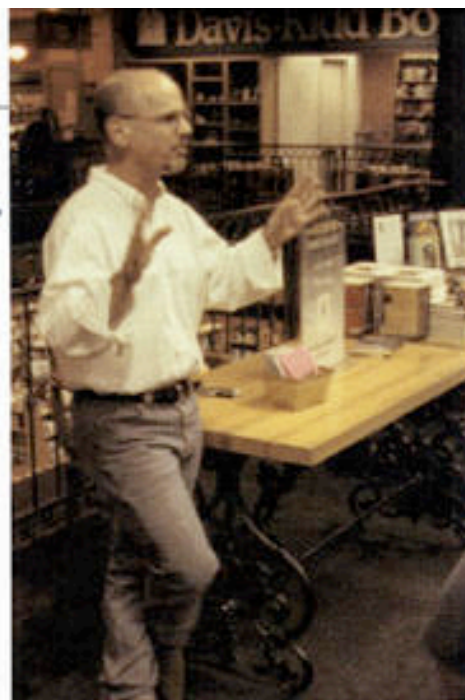
Mark Delaney

computer savvy, is excruciatingly shy and carries her ever-present laptop like a security blanket. Jake, 200 pounds and muscular, proves too gentle to excel at athletics. He bucks the dumb-jock stereotype by playing the clarinet. Mattie, the youngest member, possesses an uncanny ability to disappear in plain sight. He’s good at magic tricks and at tinkering with gadgets.

Experience, the Best Teacher

“The truth is that each of the characters is either someone that I was or someone that I wanted to be when I was in high school,” Mark admits. Moreover, as a teacher, “I’m exposed to an endless supply of young minds and personalities,” he adds.

Careful not to invade his students’ privacies nor create an artificial tone in his work, the author avoids lifting



above: Once shy, the author now enjoys mingling with the public, especially young fans. **right:** Mark, an English teacher, uses whatever it takes—song lyrics, political speeches—to entice students to read.

material directly from his young charges. Instead, he explains, “It’s more about picking up a feeling and the way they react to each other.”

Only once has he directly quoted a student, a fact he credited on the book’s acknowledgement page. When an accident-prone girl came in to Mark’s classroom with yet another sling on her arm, the teacher questioned her: “Again?”

“Yeah,” the resigned student replied. “The emergency room ought to just give me a card that says, ‘Buy 12, Get 1 Free.’” One of the *Misfits*’ characters mutters that same line in a hospital setting.

Beatle-Mania Muse

Although he plans more *Misfits* books, Mark’s most recent offering moves away from sleuthing teens. *Pepperland* revolves around Star, a teenage girl struggling with grief after her mother’s death. To heal, the teen decides to repair her mother’s guitar, write a tribute song, and hand-deliver an unsent fan letter that her mother penned years before to the Beatles’ John Lennon.

He researched for *Pepperland* by



reading *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* by Hope Edelman.

"I had this opening scene. I had this character," Mark recalls. "But I had no idea what the story was going to be." Later, he found himself teaching four girls, each of whom had lost a parent.

"I started seeing in them some of the emotional responses I had read about in *Motherless Daughters*," he says. The plot for *Pepperland* gelled when the author connected healing with the phenomenon of the Beatles' first visit to the United States.

"The Beatles came to America in

February of 1964," Mark notes, "not even three months after the JFK assassination. Here we were, staggered as a nation. The music was the Band-Aid that we needed at that time." That theme carries over when, with a little help from John Lennon, his *Pepperland* protagonist gets by.

When stories come together like that, Mark says with a grin, writing "doesn't feel like work to me. It's actually kind of invigorating."

That's just the upbeat attitude readers expect from this talented man.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON



Why He Writes for Youngsters

"I had not necessarily attempted to write to a young adult audience," Mark says about his work. "The voice that spoke from the page just read like a young adult."

He notes the young adult category has surged in recent years. Any whisper of inferiority "was waved away by J.K. Rowling's magic wand," he says, referring to the author of the Harry Potter series.