

# "GUY READER" IS NOT AN OXYMORON

Gordon Korman

I was in the midst of my Titanic trilogy when I stepped back from the story, which had reached a classic moment. The great liner, about to founder, had tipped up to almost vertical. My character, a 15-year-old junior steward, clung desperately to the rail at the stern, 30 stories above the black water. Worse, he had just heard the colossal roar caused by the gigantic reciprocating engines and mammoth iron boilers falling through the ship, crashing through compartments and bulkheads, destroying everything in their path. He knew that his father—a stoker on the "Black Gang"—was most certainly dead, and he himself probably would soon be, too.

I couldn't help thinking to myself, "Am I out of my mind? I'm in my 40s, and the simple act of putting it into words is freaking me out. Why am I writing a story like this for *kids*?"

My next thought, which followed immediately, was "Boys are going to *love* this!"

From the letters and e-mails I've received since the trilogy was published, I'm confident I was right. We act as if what appeals to male readers is an unfathomable mystery, understood only by a clairvoyant few. But if we're honest with ourselves—if we focus on what boys *will* like, rather than what we *wish* they'd like—most of us know it when we see it.

I have an imaginary friend when I write—more like an imaginary heckler, actually. A boy—fifth, sixth, maybe seventh grade—seated at a student

desk. He has a short upper body, but long legs, crossed at the ankles. Because the two halves are separated by the desktop, they seem to belong to two different people. His arms are crossed at his chest in a gesture of defiance, and his lower lip is curled back 180 degrees. He's got a look on his face as if he smells something not horrible, yet slightly off, in the room. The nonverbal message is basically: "All right, impress me." And he's 90% sure I'm not up to the job.

The point of my imaginary friend isn't to create a stereotype of a certain kind of reader. His (or, sometimes, her) purpose is to keep me honest. Because there are a lot of him out there. And his opinion of my work—even if I'm guessing at it—carries a lot of weight. You can win a Newbery without him, and he's by no means a prerequisite for a starred review. But if you want to reach a truly broad audience, you need him on your side.

The first delivery system that brought my books to this silent army of reluctant readers and can-read-but-won'ts was humor. I've tried many different styles in a 35-year career, but humor will always be my first love. My first book was written when I was 12 as a seventh-grade language arts assignment for a track and field coach who had to cover an English class.

Gordon Korman is the author of, most recently, *The Hypnotists*; e-mail [gkorman@optonline.net](mailto:gkorman@optonline.net).

Having never taught creative writing before, he gave us carte blanche to work on whatever we wanted—from mid-February through the end of the year in June.

He called it writing a novel, and while none of us took him very seriously, that's exactly how it worked out for me. Classmates read my project and loved it. "This is as good as anything they've got down in the library," said one—still the greatest review I've ever received. I submitted my novel to Scholastic because, at the time, I was class monitor for the book orders. In an odd way, I was almost an employee already. Keeper of the bonus points—it was no small responsibility.

I signed a contract for *This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall* a few days after my 13th birthday, and the book was published when I was a freshman in high school. Ironically, I didn't see how cool all this was, because (a) I was a freshman in high school, and we all know how easy to impress they are, and (b) through a teenager's perception of the passage of time, everything seemed to be progressing at a glacial pace. Now, though, as I visit schools and work with 12-year-olds, *This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall*, republished two years ago, still amazes me because it was so *doable*. Every chapter represents one week's work back in Mr. Hamilton's class in 1976. Any experienced teacher could probably dial up the names of dozens of former students capable of that or better in a seven-day time period. The success of *Macdonald Hall* was in how it all came together, mostly because of the humor.

As a seventh grader, I wasn't exactly a member of the silent army; I was a good reader, but I was also somewhat disgruntled and very hard to please. The books I loved best—also, come to think of it, TV shows, movies, and just about

"GUY READER" IS NOT AN OXYMORON

*"He called it writing a novel, and while none of us took him very seriously, that's exactly how it worked out for me."*

everything—were funny. I find it utterly baffling that humor isn't a larger part of a child's education. Consider your adult life. What do you use more often: Your sense of humor, or your ability to recognize foreshadowing? Now look at the curriculum in your school district. Lots of foreshadowing; plenty of iambic pentameter. Humor? Not so much.

It's weird that we teach every skill under the sun, yet many teachers act as if a sense of humor is something you have to be born with, period. You hear it around the coffee pot in every faculty room: "The jokes are passing miles over their heads" or "My kids are way too literal to understand that kind of humor." Well, they didn't understand how to diagram sentences either until someone showed them how to do it! I didn't laugh at *Seinfeld* or *Monty Python* the first time I saw those shows. A sense of humor is like a muscle. It develops through use.

Look at the novels students in your district read between, let's say, fourth and eighth grade. I'll bet the total of funny books is less than the number that contain a single, relatively narrow plot point—a beloved dog dies. Think about that: We are sending kids to high school who, in their literary experience, have attended canine funerals more often than they have laughed. (This was the inspiration for my novel *No More Dead Dogs*. My imaginary friend may not always be the subtlest thinker, but when he sees the book cover with the award sticker and the golden retriever, it doesn't take him very long to figure out that the dog is going down.)

I don't mean to pick on the dead dogs. Many of those books are wonderful. What I object to is the amount of curriculum real estate they occupy while humor languishes in the margins if it's anywhere. This is a disservice to all our students; to reluctant readers, it might as well be a "Keep Out" sign. This reading gig is not for you.

Still, I'd never say that simply being funny, in and of itself, automatically makes a successful novel for the silent army. There needs to be another hook, and although there's no formula, it's hard to beat the cool factor. *The Hypnotists* takes the aspirational route: a kid who suddenly discovers he's a natural mind-bender who can make people do whatever he wants them to. There are many ways to get to cool. It's elusive for those who try to put it into words, but we all know what works for us. That should be the starting point, then. What do I think is cool?

I love old movies, and some of my favorites are good old-fashioned heist stories. If you've ever seen *Ocean's Eleven*—I mean the *original* with Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack—it's amazing how innocent those guys are. They're all decorated heroes returned from the Second World War, and stateside life just seems flat to them. Could I create a situation that would draw *kids* into that kind of caper? Tricky, because I'd have to find a way to maintain the all-important innocence while my characters were basically committing a Class A felony. The answer came from my brilliant editor, David Levithan: What if



*"We teach every skill under the sun, yet many teachers act as if a sense of humor is something you have to be born with."*

the protagonists aren't so much stealing something as stealing it *back*? That became the idea for *Swindle*—kids, who have been conned out of a valuable Babe Ruth baseball card by an unscrupulous collector, launching an elaborate operation to take it back.

There could not have been a more perfect object for the robbery than a baseball card. On the one hand, it's a totally common kid-friendly item. On the other, everybody knows that certain rare cards can be worth spectacular amounts of money. One recently sold at auction for more than 2 million dollars. The most fun part of *Swindle* was putting together the "team," a collection of misfits who just so happen to have exactly the right special talents to outflank the enemy's defenses, sidestep the burglar alarm, contain the guard dog, distract the nosy neighbor, foil the traitor in their midst, get inside the safe, and make off with a million-dollar card.

*Swindle* is kind of an anomaly these days, a stand-alone story that spawned a series one companion novel at a time. But if you look at the books carefully, they're all essentially old movie plots, starting with *Swindle* as a robbery. *Zoobreak* is a prison break, liberating mistreated animals from a cheesy zoo. *Framed* is a classic wrong-man story. *Showoff* is a canine *My Fair Lady* (the plan is to enter Luthor, the elephantine and slightly unstable Doberman, in the annual Global Kennel Society dog show in New York City). And *Hideout*, the latest, is exactly what the title implies—concealing Luthor from his scheming

former owner by smuggling him on the bus to summer camp.

*Showoff* and *Hideout* represent a response to the thousands of letters, emails, and questions I get asking why Luthor is on the cover of all the *Swindle* books. It's true that he has more or less become the official spokes-beast of the series without being a huge part of the stories, and I felt a strange yet powerful need to bring the focus around to him. Confession: I wasn't much of a dog person. I never had pets growing up, and we're a guinea pig family now. But while writing *Showoff*, I really fell for Luthor. I can't help but wonder, though, that if the designer hadn't chosen to feature the dog as the centerpiece of the *Swindle* cover, would *Showoff* and *Hideout* ever have been written? It's funny to think that an art department decision—and the silent army's strong reaction to it—has altered the direction of my series.

I still do a lot of school visits. It's the only sure-fire way to reach the silent army. At bookstore and public library appearances, you can't ever be certain they'll show up. That's what makes them a *silent* army—they're the opposite of taste-makers, who are a smaller group with outsize influence. Reluctant readers and can-read-but-won'ts generally don't turn out at the events where their opinions are likely to be counted.

They do purchase books, but they tend to get them from sources under the radar of services like BookScan and the various bestseller lists. At school visits, though, I read them loud and clear—I

hear what gets the big laugh, the introspective chuckle, and "You think that's funny? That makes one of us." When it comes to getting an honest opinion, I don't have to worry about this group. I usually end up with more honesty than I know what to do with.

That's why I was really worried about how my readers would react when I set aside humor and began to focus on my adventure trilogies. It was a big adjustment for me. First, a humorous book depends on regular comic payoffs. You don't have that in the adventure genre. The tension of the story has to be strong enough to keep the reader turning pages. If it isn't, you've lost your audience. Second, when I'd started writing, I'd been very close in age to my characters. Those early books relied heavily on my relatively recent experience of being a kid. But when I started the Island series, that whole system came crashing down around my ears. Where do you get shipwreck experience? And even if you could find it, would you want to?

That was how I discovered research—to serve as a replacement for the experience I didn't have. It didn't take long to get hooked. I went out and bought a sailing manual to brush up on the terminology. On the very first page was this warning (I paraphrase): "Never start the engine without first activating the blower switch to clear the gas fumes

*"Those early books relied heavily on my relatively recent experience of being a kid."*

from the engine room. Otherwise, the ignition spark will light the fumes, the fire will travel up the fuel line, and you'll blow up your own boat." I stared at the message, right there on page (i) of the forward. The actual manual hadn't even started yet—and it had already given me the climax of my novel.

My 14-year-old video game-addicted son is constantly surfing the Internet, searching for "cheats" to help him with his games. I love watching him—he's using the resources at his disposal to find the information he needs to do a better job at the task at hand. There could be no more perfect definition of research. So when I visit schools, I tell the kids that my research is just looking for cheats to write a better book.

Sometimes the cheats practically do the plotting for me. When researching the Everest trilogy, I noticed that about four times as many climbers had reached the summit as had died somewhere on the mountain. Although this doesn't necessarily mean that you have a one-in-four chance of dying if you tackle Everest (that figure is approximately 1 in 10), the numbers were very compelling to me. If I put four teenagers on my team trying to become the youngest alpinists in history to conquer the world's highest mountain, there'd be a legitimate chance that one of those four might not be coming home at the end.

Numbers had an even greater role in the Titanic trilogy; I was constrained by the well-known facts of the real story. There were 2,223 passengers and crew aboard at the time of the sinking; only 706 were rescued. More than two thirds lost their lives. That tragic math hangs over the voyage long before the temperature drops and the ice warnings from other ships begin to arrive via Marconi wireless. Every 3-way conversation carries the subtext that 2 of the participants might not survive the sinking;

*"When I visit schools, I tell the kids that my research is just looking for cheats to write a better book."*

similarly, 8 out of every table of 12 in the opulent grand saloon could perish. It was hard for me, because I'm normally a happy-ending kind of writer. In my original proposal for the trilogy, all my main characters went on to survive the sinking. But would that do justice to a disaster that claimed the lives of 1,517 people? And anyway, if I was so married to the idea of a happy ending, why would I choose the *Titanic* as my topic in the first place?

Although relatively few reluctant readers would classify themselves as avid researchers, I'd argue that the fruits of research yield the kind of plot points most likely to engage them—shark feeding frenzies, wilderness survival, the effect of icy water immersion on the human body. This is research that passes the cool-factor test and earns the Good Housekeeping seal of approval from the silent army. It's been particularly invaluable in *The 39 Clues*, not just for me, but for all the writers who have written for the multiauthor series.

My first contribution, Book 2: *One False Note*, was supposed to focus on the discovery that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was, in actuality, a member of the Cahill clan, the most powerful family in human history. On behalf of the silent army, I reacted immediately. "Mozart? Are you kidding me? There's no way I'm going to convince my readers that classical music is cool!" True, the series seemed to have a built-in audience even before the first installment was published. But I wasn't worried about success; I was fretting over my

responsibility to my fan base, which—although I never took a survey—was made up primarily of non-Mozart fans. It was a real dilemma.

The research was what bailed me out. Because I wasn't an enthusiast of the music, I naturally gravitated to other aspects of Mozart's life. He was something of a goofball. His letters, often sarcastic in tone, also showed a fondness for bathroom humor. His comments about his patrons read like an 18th-century version of Johnny Paycheck's *Take This Job and Shove It*. This was something I could work with—something I could sell the silent army on.

Many now believe that Mozart would have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome today. Certainly, he was something of a talented misfit, which has long been a recurring theme in my novels—the ungifted kid in the gifted academy, the hypnotist raised by non-hypnotic parents, the home-schooled hippie dropped into the dog-eat-dog world of eighth grade. Even the *Swindle* characters are essentially just oddballs and outsiders who happen to have the right skills for grand larceny. Come to think of it, maybe this Mozart guy was right up my alley!

The aspect of Mozart's story I knew my readers would like best came not from the composer's life, but from his death. He died pretty much flat broke, and, in accordance with the custom of the time, was buried in a mass unmarked pauper's grave. For all intents and purposes, he disappeared off the face of the earth. The final disposition of



*"Those have always been the greatest moments of my career...the times that one of my books has been that book for a kid."*

the greatest musical genius of all time is a complete mystery. And although there are several theories that might explain Mozart's penury at the end—opium addiction and high living top the list—the truth is that nobody really knows what he squandered his money on.

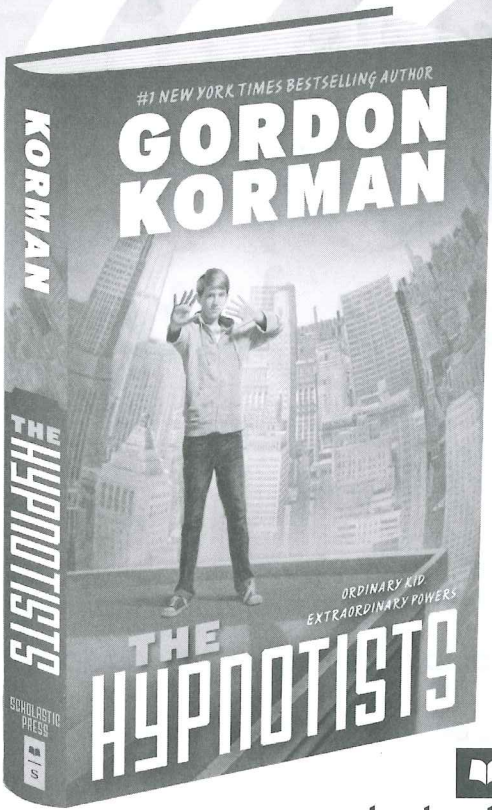
Those words—*nobody knows*—are the Holy Grail for 39 Clues writers, because it gives us the opportunity to fill in the historical gap with the intrigues of the 500-year-old Cahill family. In the case of *One False Note*, Mozart sank all his cash, resources, and time into the search for the 39 Clues. The series has always had that subversively educational quality—a knack for connecting readers and history. It's fun to see members of the silent army jazzed about Mozart and Ben Franklin and discussing Caravaggio's *Medusa* and *The Travels of Marco Polo* with genuine enthusiasm.

Of course, there's no guarantee that any series or individual novel will spark a reluctant boy to become a reader. In the course of my touring, I run into a lot of teachers and librarians who consider this a personal failure—and some are really down on themselves. This is unfair. Guys are tough nuts to crack. Even the very proficient can be murder to motivate to pick up a book. However, we've all had the incredible experience of watching a nonreader bloom because of *one* story. You can practically see the gears turning: "Wait. This is *reading*? How long has this been going on?" Even the most obstinate, seemingly far gone, stalwart nonreader is never more than a single love connection away. Those have always been the greatest moments of my career—not awards or bestseller lists, but the times that one of my books has been *that* book for a kid.

A final thought: We speak of this archetypal guy reader who radiates an almost passive-aggressive challenge to the teachers, librarians, and writers who dare to engage him. But in reality, this kid isn't necessarily male. I spoke at an all-girls school in Houston recently. I was talking about my Everest trilogy and mentioned that bodies of climbers who die high on the mountain freeze quickly, effectively making them "part of the tour," because they will never decompose.

In the groundswell of reaction to this grisly piece of information, one fourth-grade girl exclaimed "Awesome!" with such total and unrestrained zest and relish that I sometimes still hear it in my sleep. What a classic guy-reader reaction to come from a girl! Would she have felt free to speak out so strongly at a coed school? Or would one of the boys have co-opted the opinion that gave her such joy?

That could be the ultimate conundrum in addressing the issue of the male reader: Right when you think you've got a handle on the problem, you realize that some of those reluctant boys just might be girls.



# YOU WANT THIS BOOK

**"Action aplenty, and belly laughs too."**—Kirkus Reviews

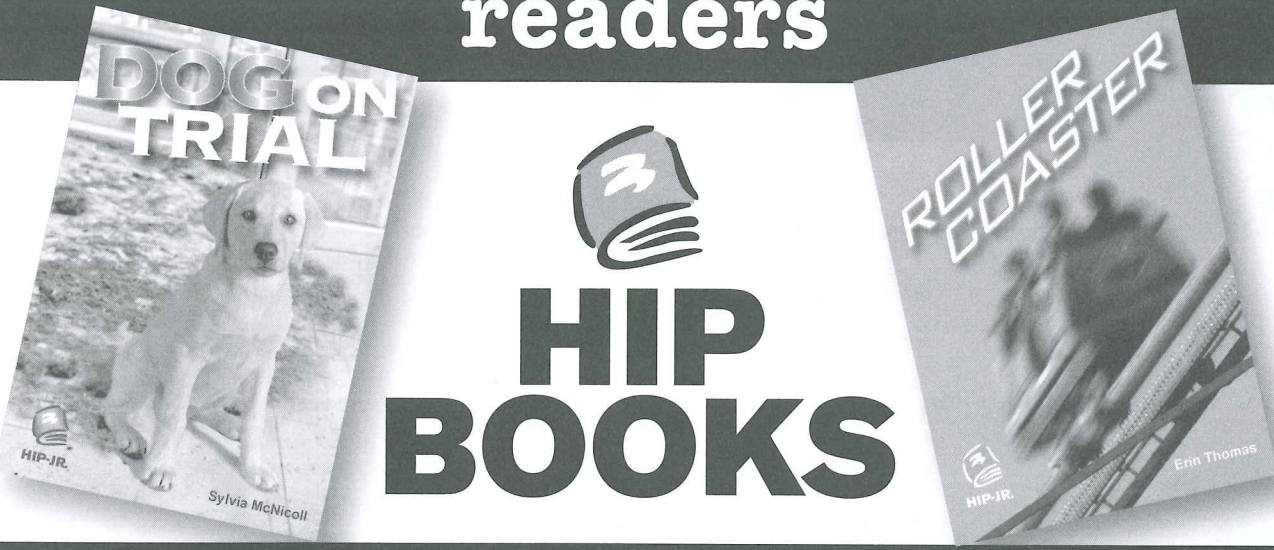
**"Fast-paced...An entertaining mix of intense action and goofy fun."**—Publishers Weekly

Ages 8-12 • 240 pages  
Hardcover: 978-0-545-50322-8 • \$16.99  
Ebook: 978-0-545-50327-3 • \$16.99

**SCHOLASTIC**  
scholastic.com/Gordon Korman

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

## Two new novels for struggling middle-school readers



# HIP BOOKS

High Interest Publishing [www.hip-books.com](http://www.hip-books.com)  
Great novels for reluctant and struggling readers, grades 4-12