

Lemony Snicket

Writing the mysterious and unexpected



Daniel Handler may not be a name that is immediately recognised, but say Lemony Snicket, and instantly you think of the mysterious children's writer responsible for the hugely successful, macabre books - *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. So why mention the two names together? Contrary to what Mr Handler wishes everyone to believe, they are one and the same. "Mr. Handler and I aren't the same person at all. Where in the world, aside from countless press clippings, would you get such an idea?"

At public events, he appears as Daniel Handler, and tells the audience that Lemony Snicket met some kind of horrible fate on his way over. He originally came up with 'Lemony Snicket' as a pseudonym to use, rather than placing his real name on the mailing lists of several right-wing organizations he was researching for his adult novel, *The Basic Eight*. He resurrected the name, as the doleful narrator and author of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and subsequent children's books. I was intrigued to know - would it be Daniel Handler or Lemony Snicket answering my questions? "This is Lemony Snicket, speaking up for himself."

Many writers publish using a pseudonym, but Lemony Snicket is not only a pen name or narrator, he emerges as a character with a life story. As a character, Lemony Snicket is subject to a fictional autobiography, *Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography*. He is a troubled writer and photographer, falsely accused of felonies and constantly hunted by the police and his enemies. He takes on the task of researching and writing the sad story of the Baudelaire children.

Daniel Handler was born in California and was an insatiable reader as a child. Known for his dry wit and matter-of-fact



take on the mysterious and macabre, he was influenced by the authors he loved as a child. "Among the many suspicious forces that surrounded me in childhood was literature. I considered Beverly Cleary, Zilpha Keatley Snyder and Edward

Gorey among my comrades-in-ink." He enjoyed school and went on to study English and American literature at University, as he had always known from an early age that he wanted to be a writer. Unfortunately, he didn't find success immediately, receiving thirty-seven rejections for his first adult novel, *The Basic Eight*. Eventually it was published and soon followed his second, *Watch Your Mouth*.

After finally achieving success in the adult book market, why did he venture into writing for children? Initially, he thought that the sort of stories he wrote would never be considered by children's publishers. Editor Susan Rich saw real potential in him as a children's author and persuaded him to write for a younger audience. He proposed an idea for the kind of story that he would have enjoyed as a kid: a dark tale about three orphans who have lost their parents in a fire and are sent to live with a distant cousin, Count Olaf, who wants nothing more than to steal the children's inheritance.

Whether it is Daniel Handler or Lemony Snicket writing, it is not the different audiences that he considers, but an interesting story told in an interesting way. "I've never understood the difference between writing for children or for adults, like I don't really understand the difference

between talking to children or talking to adults. When writing I consider nothing about who might read it, only that the sentences move the way I'd like them to. So, I don't think of the audience, I think of the traditions in a genre." When I asked whether he still gets the same enjoyment as when he first started writing, he answered in true Lemony Snicket style. "A career in literature is like that of a cat burglar, in that the most fascinating aspect of the work is often invisible, and one never knows if the end of the evening will bring glittering prizes or the inside of a cold cell."





Lemony's writing style is unique. When he was asked how he would describe his style, his initial reply was, "Worrisome ... I think all of my work has a certain tone: it looks dubiously at the world, it understands that it can be serious and hilarious at the same time. And there seem to be people who get that. And people who don't, of course."

With characteristic dark, twisted humour and irony, his stories take unexpected turns and revealing surprises. *The Lump of Coal*, published by Harper Collins (2008), is a Christmas story with a difference. The hero, a lump of coal, tries to find some purpose in life. With artistic aspirations, he realises that he might only be useful on a barbecue. A tongue-in-cheek twist on the days children were told that, if they were naughty instead of nice, they'd find a lump of coal in their Christmas stocking.

In May, *The Goldfish Ghost* was published, illustrated by his wife Lisa Brown. Another example of how Lemony sees the world: it opens with the birth of a ghost goldfish who floats upside-down out of the window, looking for companionship and encountering many ghostly sea creatures, until he joins the ghostly keeper of a lighthouse.

Lemony's talent is narrating well-crafted stories, which, while quite distressing, are perfectly suitable for children. Dark humour can somehow lighten the mood. Though events may seem far-fetched, many of his books come with a lesson for the reader. This November, Andersen Press will be publishing Lemony's latest picture book for young children – *The Bad Mood and The Stick*. This simple story is a hilarious look at the mysterious and unexpected way a bad mood wreaks havoc as it moves from person to person, leaving an unexpected trail of surprises. Intrigued, I asked why he had chosen to write about a bad mood and a stick? "I thought it would be interesting to try and track a bad mood the way one might track a criminal or some other suspicious person in one's neighbourhood, so the book began from there. The stick, I assume, is self-explanatory."

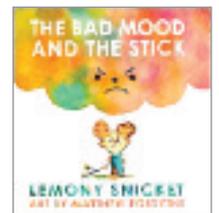


Lemony's story, which takes unexpected turns and reveals delightful surprises, is told with smart, silly language and cheeky asides. Every page is illustrated by Matthew Forsyth, with beautiful artwork using bright, colourful gouache washes. The bad mood is represented as an emoji-like cloud, showing "how moods work and impact on our lives", but can be chased away by something as simple as a stick. Did Lemony consider his intention when writing was for readers to learn something by encouraging them to ask questions? "All of my favourite literature encourages readers to ask questions, and I hope somewhere a few readers feel the same about me."

Andersen Press suggests, on their publicity sheet, that *The Bad Mood and the Stick* could be used by schools to discuss emotions, consequences, cause and effect and conflict resolution. I was curious to know if Lemony ever considered his stories a possible teaching aid. "My entire early emotional education came from literature and music. I wouldn't know where else to look for such learning."

While gathering background information, I read a variety of reviews of Lemony's books including one that commented that no reader of Lemony Snicket should expect a happy ending. In *The Bad Mood and The Stick*, the story does appear, at first, to finish with a happy ending, but then the last two illustrations suggest perhaps not! So, I asked whether his intention was to leave the reader with doubt? Was it deliberate to allow the learning process to continue? "In tracking a bad mood, one realizes that somewhere something dreadful and/or inconvenient is happening at all times. So, a happy ending is simply deciding when a certain story is over. If readers find a lesson in this, I hope it is an interesting one."

When Daniel Handley took on the persona of Lemony Snicket and began writing books for children he did so with the attitude, "It's magical to do something when you think no-one is going to care." He didn't imagine that anyone would like his books, but his books have been a success with both adults and children for nearly two decades. Intrigued by what answer he would give, for my final question I asked why did he think his books were so popular? His reply, "We shouldn't confuse omnipresence with popularity. Pneumonia is all over the world but no one would call it popular."



Debbie Wiggett

Bibliography

The Lump of Coal HarperCollins £10.00 ISBN: 978-0061574283

Goldfish Ghost Roaring Books £13.95 ISBN: 978-1626725072

The Bad Mood and The Stick Andersen £11.99 ISBN: 978-1783446421