

Inside the Worlds of Teen Boys: New Ventures From Noted Writers

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Teen Boys ... a diverse and oftentimes mysterious reading audience whom many feel are underserved in the world of young adult literature. While it maybe true that bookstore and library shelves seem, at cursory glance, to be laden with a wider variety of books aimed at teen girls, there are numerous YA authors who excel at creating outstanding books that reach out to a male audience.

These authors connect with their male readers by developing very authentic characters who manage to realistically portray the sorts of situations that typical teens face, and how they rise to these challenges. Or not. Some writers employ humour, others draw upon sports as a ways of engaging teen boys. But whatever their way of reaching out to their audience, there are in fact a healthy number of talented writers in this realm – writers who are well-recognized for their particular styles. It is therefore especially intriguing when such a writer steps outside of their niche and ventures into somewhat new terrain. Or visits similar terrain from a strikingly different angle.

William Bell's latest novel, *Only in the Movies*, is a notable example of this sort of departure. When I think of William Bell's oeuvre, I immediately call to mind some the harsh realities that he has confronted in his books – issues such as anger management, slavery and persecution, and the frightening events at Tiananmen Square. I also am reminded of the headstrong and rebellious young men who have populated many of his books. *Only in the Movies* gives readers something very different. This is a light-hearted, modern-day version of *Cyrano de Bergerac* in which Jake falls in love with the gorgeous and talented Alba Magdalena Benedetti, but lacks the words to win her heart. Alas, Alba is very forthright in her assertion that she could only ever love a man who could express himself poetically. Fortunately for Jake, his new friend Vanni, a character in her own right (complete with a nose of noteworthy proportions), is a gifted wordsmith who can “help” him compose letters to Alba and feed him all the right lines. But when Jake finds himself stage managing his eclectic assortment of friends and they are confronted with a situation that could dramatically affect all of their futures, it falls to him to find the words to put the situation to rights.

While Jake may lack the chip on his shoulder that many of Bell's protagonists are known for, he nevertheless displays courage and strength of spirit when he stands up for himself and his cast. He is an amiable and earnestly likeable character whose lifelong dream of becoming a screenwriter is cleverly incorporated into the story by way of the numerous scenes that are written out in the form of the screenplays that he envisions in his head. The relationship that Jake has with his parents is heartwarming, as is his (not unexpected) realization of who it is that has truly captured his heart.

On the flip side of the coin, the always-good-for-a-laugh Richard Scrimger brings readers a new offering entitled *Me & Death: An Afterlife Adventure*. This is a more sobering chronicle than his tales of Norbert, the alien who takes up residence in a young boy's nose in *A Nose for Adventure* and its sequels. As the story begins, Jim – a teen hooligan who bullies classmates and hotwires cars – is himself hit by a car and his life hangs by a thread. While his physical body lies comatose, his spirit embarks on an afterlife journey in which a series of oddball ghosts revisit various times in his life with him, all the while urging him to recognize the error in his ways. They exhort him to make changes in his life and his relationships in order to spare himself the grim fate that currently awaits him ... the same fate that these sorrowful spectres are themselves forced to endure.

With this undisguised nod to Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Scrimger tackles several thought-provoking subjects here. As readers journey through the various episodes of Jim's young and troubled life, we are given the opportunity to see into the mind and heart of a "bad boy", to see some of the events that shaped him into the hateful adolescent he has become, and to see also that transformation is possible, even for the unlikeliest of characters. In a sudden and unexpected twist, the author also introduces the topic of abuse within families. This is all new terrain for Scrimger. However, his trademark humour still manages to shine through the narrative; even when handling weightier subject matter he still has the gift of his comedic touch that conspires to add some levity to a potentially grim tale.

In his previous books, Matt Beam has established himself as an insightful chronicler of the adolescent male experience. In *Last December* he experiments with a new format: Steven's story unfolds as a letter that he is writing to his unborn baby sister. In this letter, he candidly recounts the confusing jumble of thoughts and feelings he is trying to sort through, including his feelings about this soon-to-be new baby in their lives. He takes us through the experiences of his daily life: tryouts for the hockey team; a confrontation with a skinhead/bully; making new friends; Jenny from science class; arguments that he inexplicably provokes with his mother; and meeting Byron. Byron teaches him everything he needs to know about Pacman ... and maybe a few other things. Like the Chaos factor. And God with a small "g". And tackling life head-on with a "balls to the wall" attitude.

In Steven's letter to baby Sam, we find a boy who is trying to make sense of his own life in the context of the wider world around him. He is surprised and caught off guard by unexpected bursts of emotion, particularly when he is dealing with his mother whom he loves, yet continually finds himself saying the most hurtful things to. This is a very honest glimpse inside the head of an ordinary 15-year-old boy who is struggling to understand, and maybe even to exert some measure of control over, who he is becoming.

Three very different books from three very different writers. Yet all three truthfully explore some aspect of what teen boys face in the coming-of-age journeys.