

Writing to the Teenager Inside:

A Talk with Kevin Brooks

Kevin Brooks burst upon the young adult literature scene with *Martyn Pig* (Chicken House/Scholastic 2003) and was an instant favorite with young people. His rapid-fire delivery of myriad details and lovable/hate-able anti-hero protagonists speak to teenagers and “the teenager inside us all,” as Kevin describes the place he goes to find that special voice, the voice of “Moo” Nelson, for example, the overweight hero of *Kissing the Rain*. Kevin shared his own story and his views on the writing craft face to face at the 2003 ALAN Workshop in San Francisco.



that Moo faces with the police and the gangster, you haven’t got too many options, really. One of the options is that you stand up and face it, but that means you become kind of like the people who are making your life hell. Another way is to just sort of put up with it and run away.

The “kissing the rain” part is almost like embracing the attitude which is thrust at you, which is hurting you rather than fighting or running away from it. That’s what I was attempting to capture.

TAR: In *Kissing the Rain* you introduce the reader to your protagonist and narrator, Mike Nelson, nicknamed Moo by his classmates, in reference to his weight problem.

“Kissing the Rain” is Moo’s expression for embracing the insulting remarks about his obesity that rain down on him from his classmates. How did you come up with that expression? Is it from your own life?

Kevin: I think it’s one of those things that just pops into my head, actually. I wanted to somehow draw together the taunting and the rain; the point of it being that if you’re in that situation where you’re being bullied, which ties into the larger dilemma

TAR: Are most kids rainmakers or rain-takers?

Kevin: Given a chance, most of them would be rain makers, I think. There’s that sort of pecking order thing, so at least they’ll be the top bully in their group. I think Moo does it to an extent with his only friend, Brady.

As I created Moo’s personality, I didn’t want the reader to just feel sorry for him, but rather I wanted the reader to bounce on the edge of feeling sorry for him—acknowledging the problems in his life, but also from the negative side, seeing why he was in the situation he was in. He’s not the most attractive, the nicest person in the world. I wanted the reader to see him from different sides, and I attempted to keep the balance between two perspectives on Moo.

Lucas and Kissing the Rain

Reviews and comments by Wendy Kelleher, Arizona State University Department of English

Kevin Brooks writes with the easy grace of a poet, using language that leaves the reader breathless at times as he speaks the truth in ways that adolescents need to hear it. Brooks pulls no punches, softens no blows. His protagonists tell stories without neat, happy endings, stories that are real and reach into the heart of truth, and then stand back and allow the reader to react without prompts or orchestration. There is no formulaic tidiness in Kevin Brooks's novels. There is only reality, a camera turning on and a camera turning off. No narration, no pedantic moralizing, no lesson to be learned. Just life as it happens.

Lucas

Kevin Brooks's third novel *Lucas* is the story of Caitlin McCann, a teenage girl living on the island of Hale among an ethnocentric and cruel citizenry far too concerned about their own inane existence. She learns the dimensions of this awful truth when Lucas ambles into her life.

Lucas is a gypsy, a rover, a man without a country who doesn't conform to any societal standard but thinks and lives for himself; he *is* an island and needs no one. Caitlin cannot fathom her love and fascination for Lucas, but the reader will; we always want what we cannot have.

The story opens with Caitlin and her dad driving her brother back from college. On the trip

home they see Lucas and Caitlin's life begins to change; unlike every other boy she's known, he doesn't feel "the need to act at all. He was just himself, take it or leave it" (97). This simple humility draws Caitlin but repels nearly everyone else on the island, and within a few days, he's the target of a campaign of terror conducted by some of the most popular (and powerful) island kids.

The story reaches its climax during a stormy evening when an old man stumbles upon a teenage girl's viciously raped and torn body, and Lucas is accused. In the ensuing witch hunt, he seeks sanctuary with Caitlin and her father as swarming villagers scream for "justice" outside their house. When he realizes they'll not be satisfied till they have him, he leaps over the crowd and runs for his shelter across the quicksand mudflats.

Just as the reader breathes a sigh of relief at his brilliant escape, Lucas makes a choice that leaves Caitlin grasping for solace in a place where none exists.

Lucas is appropriate for middle and high school, but teachers might be wise to offer a disclaimer about violence and sexual content. At 400 plus pages, the book is involved and sometimes the storyline gets lost in Caitlin's introspection about events and people. One of Brooks's particular strengths as a

story teller, however, is his sense of pacing. He intuitively juxtaposes his description of sea and weather rhythms and the unfolding events, much like the orchestration of music underlying scenes portrayed on the movie screen. To Kevin Brooks, crying yourself a story *does* work. "All you have to do is tell the truth, tell it like it was," says Caitlin's dad (inside page). He's absolutely right. *Lucas* is proof of that.

Brooks, Kevin. *Lucas*. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 2003.

Kissing the Rain

I'd place Kevin Brooks' second novel, *Kissing the Rain*, firmly in the same category as other male coming of age stories such as *Stotan* or *The Outsiders*, but with a much more sinister, knifelike edge. The story's protagonist, Mike Nelson, a.k.a. Moo (so nicknamed by his peers for his weight problem) has a cynical self image; "I ain't COOL, I ain't LEAN, I ain't HARD, I ain't MEAN ... I ain't even got a NICE PERSONALITY," he tells us; in fact, he's just fat, the victim of his male and female classmates' jeers, taunts, and daily beatings, which he has come to refer to as "the rain."

The story opens just a few hours before its ending as Moo flashes back a year earlier to a rainy November night when all his troubles began on a bridge overlooking the A12 Highway.

This is Moo's thinking place, his refuge, until one particular night when he sees an obviously staged murder. From his vantage point on the bridge, he observes what happens with the clarity and detail of a young man who pays attention to everything around him. When police talk to him later the next day, he calmly reports everything he saw, repeating the particulars without so much as a pause.

That night as Moo watches TV news coverage of the event, it dawns on him that what he actually witnessed was a police frame up of a local mobster and murderer named Keith Vine.

Moo's only friend and fellow outcast, Brady, begs for details, telling him that Vine is a "badass". His curiosity piqued, Moo does a Google search and finds out more than he wants to know. His conclusion? "I can SEE myself getting dragged into a whole heap of BADASSery."

Back at school Moo is surprised to find the "rain" of insults has stopped. The kids ask him about what he saw and beg him for details. He's in the glory seat, and while a part of him enjoys the notoriety, another part remembers the capriciousness of the crowd.

Moo soon finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. If he tells the truth in court, that Vine is innocent, the police threaten to send his dad to jail on trumped up charges. If he lies and says that Vine is guilty, the mobster has promised to make good on threats of his own. The line between good guys and bad is badly blurred, but as the novel approaches its ending Moo prepares to put an unlikely plan into action that he hopes will stop all the "rain" for good.

Brooks, Kevin. *Kissing the Rain*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 2004.

TAR: Moo's narration is almost stream of consciousness—a rapid-fire delivery—mixing long sentences with sentences of only two words, followed by words or phrases in capitals to emphasize a point. It's easy to follow but it's kind of like watching an MTV music video or a television advertisement in that lots of images and ideas come very quickly. In this writing style of yours, you accurately convey a grand number of ideas in a very small space. Do you notice the myriad of details in real life?

Kevin: I've always felt that the details are of great importance to a writer, and I have always tended to notice everything around me. I think it's the small things that actually characterize life. You put them all together, and that's what comprises the whole. I have always noticed, for example, the way that someone moves their eyes, the way they stand. The small things are everywhere, and they make up the world. In good writing the author can more accurately convey the essence of something through a multitude of details rather than long, direct descriptions.

TAR: You demonstrate a skill for portraying the cruelty, madness, strangeness, and humor of school

and how teenage kids, especially outcasts, experience it. For example, in the typical school cafeteria, like Mike Nelson's school cafeteria, the unpopular kid faces the daily problem that no peers will let him eat lunch at their table. How do you know kids this age so well? Were you ever a teacher?

Kevin: I was never a teacher, but what I do remember very well from when I was a teenager are the emotions. I know exactly how I felt in certain situations, and I still feel some of the same emotions in similar situations now. I am much better at dealing with them now, but if I go into a room full of strange people now, I'll feel virtually the same as I did when I was a kid. Now, of course, I've done it so many times that I've learned how to deal with it, but beneath that, the same instinctive, emotional reaction takes place.

Those kinds of things that seem small now didn't seem small at all back then. Every single day, every single minute, there is stuff for a teenager to deal with it. As we get older, it's probably still there, but we have learned to deal with it.

Until I was eleven, I went to a small village school, but then I won a scholarship to a big, wealthy, private school. Suddenly, I found myself

away from the kids I grew up with and with kids who were much wealthier. I often took sanctuary in books. Twenty years later, I was commuting to work in London, sitting on the train among lots of people, reading a book, and I realized that not much had changed. Adults drive cars instead of bikes, and carry briefcases instead of satchels and talk about markets, but it's all pretty much the same, just the outer layer changes. The real stuff is still the same.

TAR: Speaking of sanctuary, real or figurative, Mike Nelson finds sanctuary at a bridge where he passes time watching the traffic go by and escaping from the world. When you were his age, did you have a bridge or place of sanctuary where you went, and do you think that's a common thing for adolescents?

Kevin: Yes. Although I had two brothers, I quite enjoyed being on my own. The house I grew up in had a sort of an attached garage with a flat roof and a little parapet. You could get down on the roof from the landing window, and I used to spend a lot of time on the garage roof. I would spend a lot of time just sitting up there, really, on my own, and I never got tired of looking down.

Maybe not everyone is this way—some people find sanctuary in the company of other people rather than being alone, but I think everybody has a place where they go to feel sanctuary. Even now, I have a place; my sanctuary now is sitting in my little room in front of my computer, writing.

TAR: The bridge works well for Mike Nelson because it works as a plot device in the conflict because he sees the murder take place there, and it works in characterization of Moo, as well.

Kevin: I think about stories a lot before I write them. Before the writing of this book, I actually saw a boy on a bridge. He seemed to be wrapped in a sort of loneliness but peacefulness, as well. That fit with the ideas about which I was getting ready to write.

TAR: One of the things that makes Mike Nelson appealing is that he has this intelligent, dry, but dark sense of humor. As the narrator, the opportu-

nity is often there for him to make fun of himself, and he takes it. It seems to be a tool that he uses to defend himself. Is this dryness common to the British sense of humor? Is Moo's sense of humor actually your sense of humor?

Kevin: It's mine. I'm not a bleak person, but I am sort of dry in my sense of humor. Sometimes when I'm writing some of the humor comes through, but some may need to be explained to Americans because it can be in the British style. I suppose there are different national senses of humor; it's risky to generalize, but I think there can be differences. I think humor works very well in dark situations. A story is hard to read if it is all dark, but the humor makes it readable.

It can't all be dry, either, and different styles of humor work in different ways. Some of the best comedy I have seen, like the American television show, *The Simpsons*, isn't just funny but has some point to make. I even like sort of middle-of-the-road things like *Cheers* and *Friends*. They're funny in a different way, and actually English humor isn't always dry; we have Benny Hill type of humor, as well.

TAR: Early in *Kissing the Rain*, Moo's dad has on a Homer Simpson shirt, so I couldn't help but from that point on think of him as Homer Simpson. Was that intentional on your part?

Kevin: Just a little inside out joke. The image goes into the back of your mind, and a character is built without having to say, "He looks like so and so," in an overt description.

TAR: Moo's dark and quirky sense of humor, the twists and turns of the plot, and your distinctive writing style combine to give the book a sort of Chris Crutcher, Ken Kesey, Hunter Thompson flavor with perhaps some overtones of Robert Cormier. Your writing is more sophisticated than just telling a story. Have you had to work to attain this style, or does it come naturally? Does it take a lot of revision to get that kind of complexity?

Kevin: That's a nice list of names. I especially like Ken Kesey. The writing does come kind of naturally

now, but it didn't when I first started writing. When I was writing stuff for adults, I was unpretentiously trying to write the great masterpiece, the great novel to show how good I was. But you can lose track of the story that way. When I started writing for and about teenagers, the story became the main thing. You've got to write a good story first. I found that all the nice little bits of prose and poetry that I like in a piece could still go in, but they are almost like the garnish to the main course, which is the story.

I've always loved really good writing, especially good writing that includes a good story; that's the ideal—when great writing doesn't get too much in the way of the story. That's what I have aimed to do in my writing. I sometimes have to be a bit hard on myself and edit out stuff [I have written] I like, passages that are really good writing but maybe get in the way of the story. I've had to learn how to do editing like that with the help of my publisher. I still enjoy the art of words and style.

TAR: Your word choice is masterful, and sometimes you even invent words like “hipponotic” and “a nonfat smile.” The language of your writing is enjoyable even just for its own sake.

Kevin: I enjoy writing in that fashion, and I never really change the nuts and bolts of how I write. I may change the direction slightly depending on the audience, but my basic structure and style remain the same. I don't change much. It should be writing that could be enjoyed by people of different ages. I do spend a lot of time picking the right words. It's like painting, in which you make sure you get the right shades; in writing, you make sure you get

the right words. In isolation, it might not make a huge difference but throughout the whole book, the writer can pick words that create rhythms that emphasize moods or feelings. That gives a work a nice edge, and I try to take the time to get the words right.

TAR: You mentioned Raymond Chandler as one of your influences. Are you an aficionado of the detective story?

Kevin: Yes, I've always liked that genre. I read a lot of that sort of thing when I was young. Now I read Lawrence Sanders, James Lee Burke, and people like that. There are some really great crime writers, but the crime itself isn't the point, it's just a good device to create a story.

I'm always looking for new authors to read. Once I find an author I like, I actually wait for them to write the next book. I didn't read Stephen King for a long time, then one day I gave him a try and found that I loved his work. I don't read horror as a genre, necessarily, and I don't really like the stuff solely based on monsters, but Stephen King writes really well. I think he writes a good story. I also thought his book, *On Writing*, was one of the best books about writing that I have ever read.

TAR: In *On Writing* Stephen King says that when he writes, he has an imaginary ideal reader in mind and includes just as much detail as he imagines that ideal reader would like to know. Do you have a sort of ideal reader, an audience in mind when you write?

Kevin: I suppose I do, but it's the teenage version of me. The teenage me has never really left;

When we're all young we all paint and we all write and we all sing, but then we reach a certain age when we're told we have to do it properly. If we don't do it properly, that is according to the formal practices, then we're told to give it up. It's a shame because, although it can be good to learn to do things properly, there are other ways to do them. As long as you do something passionately, how it comes out is just about as good as any other way.

I think it stays with everyone over time. For *Martyn Pig*, *Kissing the Rain* and *Lucas*, I was kind of writing for the teenage person in me. When I'm writing adult stuff, I suppose I am writing to the adult part of me.

TAR: You and Stephen King share a talent for going inside the minds of your characters and revealing their inner thoughts. It seems to facilitate the reader's identification with that character. How does that work?

Kevin: It can work at many levels. When you've got something that's really bothering you and you can't really express it or talk about it with other people, you may think you're the only bloke in the world who has this issue, but suddenly you come across somebody else who voices it, and you think, "I'm not the only one in the world." That helps you as a sort of friendship, and a friendship is formed with that character.

Young boys, for example, might talk about sex, but they'll never talk about love with each other. They never discuss love with their friends; it just isn't done. You fall in love with someone and can't tell anyone, and it's like a volcano inside you. You can't talk about it, so what do you do with it?

TAR: Speaking of the communication practices of today's youth, what effect do you think the Internet has had on the writing practices and skills of young people, especially emailing and web logging?

Kevin: In some quarters, there's a fear that although many young people are using immediate messaging and using it quite frequently, they aren't necessarily writing with grammatical correctness. But you have to say that they are writing far more than they used to, and that's a very good thing, I think.

Chat rooms have some good and bad issues, as well. I don't know about the United States, but in the UK, there's been a big clamp down on chat rooms because of the danger of not knowing the

true identity of the chatters, which is fair enough. There's also an advantage to chat rooms, however, in that people who are lonely, people who don't have any friends or anyone to talk to, can talk to people online, which is probably a good thing.

One good thing about all the writing that has come as a result of the Internet is the passion and honesty in the writing. When we're all young we all paint and we all write and we all sing, but then we reach a certain age when we're told we have to do it properly. If we don't do it properly, that is according to the formal practices, then we're told to give it up. It's a shame because, although it can be good to learn to do things properly, there are other ways to do them. As long as you do something passionately, how it comes out is just about as good as any other way. When young people are talking on their weblogs, they are expressing themselves passionately; they're just communicating naturally without trying to be like everybody else. They just want to be themselves. I think it's really good. I think it's a good outlet.

TAR: Your mother is still living in England. How does she feel about your success?

Kevin: She's quite happy for me but not entirely surprised because I was a pretty good student in school, including university.

Kevin Brooks lives in the small town of Maningtree in Essex. He and his wife, Susan, have been together for over 20 years. They have a retriever/collie cross named Jess, and a new puppy named Shaky, whom Kevin describes as "a lurcher, six-months old, a bit mad but very nice." Kevin's fourth book, Candy, is finished and due out next year. He is working on a fifth one at the moment. He also has a small novel, Bloodline, coming out in August through Barrington Stoke, an Edinburgh publisher with a specialty in books for reluctant readers. He has a short story, "Dumb Chocolate Eyes," in an anthology called Thirteen coming soon from Orchard. If that is not enough, Kevin has also been working on a screenplay version of his first YA novel, Martyn Pig.