



Paul Fleischman

Seedfolks
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Paul Fleischman writes about how he came to create *Seedfolks*:

The origin of SEEDFOLKS lies in the fact that I like to read while I eat (when not with my family). Greatly disappointed to find no issue of the San Francisco Chronicle lying around at a bagel bakery where I was having lunch a few years back, I opened with great reluctance the only printed matter there, a free New Age newspaper--and was instantly rewarded. On page 2 was an article about a local psychotherapist who uses gardening as a therapy. She mentioned that doctors in ancient Egypt prescribed walking through a garden as a cure for the insane. That's the line that set the hook, deep. The magnetism that takes place at this stage of a book began operating. Memories, ideas, notebook jottings, newspaper stories all came flying toward me. When I was in college, my mother had been a volunteer at the Veterans Hospital's therapeutic garden in Los Angeles, working with shell-shocked soldiers from the Korean and Vietnam wars; a friend of mine had helped found one of Boston's many community gardens; another friend worked at the Homeless Garden Project in Santa Cruz. I'd been looking for another idea that would lend itself to the multiple point-of-view approach I'd used in BULL RUN, and realized I'd found it. I didn't want to repeat myself too closely, however. SEEDFOLKS is set in the present, not the past; the subject matter is very different; the characters only give one monologue, not several; their accounts are longer than those in BULL RUN, closer to short short stories and more open-ended.

The patchwork of plots in a community garden seemed the perfect multi-character setting. A Civil War battle, however, held a strong edge in appeal, especially for a young adult audience. That became my challenge--to show that a seemingly static garden is in fact as full of drama as a battlefield. I tossed out all the research I'd done on soil composition and cabbage family diseases and focused on the characters. They came, like the population of Cleveland, from many places. My Boston friend made me a tape about her experiences and mentioned one gardener with a strong capitalistic streak who'd sold his produce (against the rules). He became Virgil's father. My wife's work with pregnant teenagers led to Maricela's chapter. I'd volunteered as an aide in a middle school ESL class for two years and drew Gonzalo's experience from that. Some characters, like Kim, came out of the blue. Many are parts of me. When I lived in conservative Omaha for a year and owned the only beard on the block, I went out of my way to start friendly conversations with people at the bus stop and at the checkstand, trying to mend the rips in the social net, like Sam in the book.

One layer down, the book had a different origin. I grew up in a suburban, nuclear family setting. We rarely saw the extended family and the community had little social life. People watched TV in the evening instead of chatting out on the non-existent stoop. Though the freedom such a lifestyle allows is appealing, the isolation has given me a lifelong hunger for joining with other people for some common purpose. That purpose has usually been music, but the same impetus lies behind my books for two voices and those for readers' theater, into which category I place SEEDFOLKS. For me, the ancient Egyptians were right. A stroll through a community garden leaves me happy and hopeful, cheered by the sight of what we can accomplish together.

--Paul Fleischman