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The Secret Fruit of Peter Paddington
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Peter's story is very painful, and yet you allow your narrative so much lightness, so much freedom to move between moments of poignancy, confusion, and hilarity; in fact all these emotions are sometimes happening simultaneously in any given scene. How do you so consistently find the humor at the heart of life's most awkward moments?

I learned a valuable lesson about humor around the time my dad was dying. The morning my sister called to tell me that the end was near, I hopped on the first bus out of Toronto. When I got to the hospital, there was this sigh of relief. I was last family member to arrive. Everyone figured that my dad could die then. (As if dying is something you just kind of "do," like washing the dishes.) Six hours and seventeen chocolate bars later, we were still waiting for dad to die. "Maybe we should leave the room," my sister suggested. "Some people like to be alone when they die." So, off we shuffled into the hall and stood there, staring at the nurses as they walked by and periodically checking our wristwatches. When we figured we'd allowed my dad sufficient time to pass away, we poked our heads into the room. "Nope," someone would report back. "He's still breathing." The whole episode struck me as hilarious. I remember feeling horrible that I was finding humor at the same time my dad was dying. But during times of high emotional intensity, you need to let humor work its magic, however inappropriate it may seem. Laughter empowers you to cope.

Not only Peter, but all of the characters in this novel have a great sense of reality about them. They're made with such accuracy and individuality, and so are recognizable as people one has known or might know. Are they composites of people from your life? Do you ever create character as a complete "portrait" of someone you've known? What resources do you draw on to create a completely fictional character?

Generally speaking, I have a picture of someone I know or have known in my head when I start to create a character. It helps to have that kind of foundation. So most of the time, a character starts off as an actual person. But as the story progresses, the character usually moves further and further away from his or her origins and becomes the person I need him or her to be in the story. So they become less "real" and more "fictional" which, ultimately, might make them seem more "real." Um...does that, like, make any sense whatsoever?

Who are some of the writers who have influenced you the most? Who are you reading now? Is there any genre of writing that you really don't like?

I've always really admired Alice Munro's fiction and David Sedaris' humor. I met him recently! He came to Toronto to do a book signing and I stood in line for three hours with a copy of my book and when I finally got to the table, I felt like a total spaz. It was just so great to give something of my own to someone I admire. I try to mix up my own reading. Recent good books include Liberace's bio (it's titillating!) Miriam Toew's A Complicated Kindness (a fantastic book) and Chuck Palahniuk's Haunted. (totally gross, but in that good-gross kind of way.) I tend not to read Sci-Fi and Fantasy books. I just can't pick up one of those Chick Lit titles. The covers hurt my eyes.

This story reflects the culture of middle and high schools in our society with such insight and clarity. Some of the seemingly inherent problems-exclusionary groups, class hierarchy, cruelty, and all those mysterious rites of passage-seem to never change from generation to generation. Do you think there are things that could be done in education today to change any of this? Would there be any way to encourage teenagers to be less imprisoned by conventional stereotypes?

I've always thought of high school as a miniature version of the adult world. You have your poor kids and your rich kids, your dumb kids and your smart ones, the artistic kids and the jock kids, the Christian kids and the rockers, your apathetic kids and the student council members. I don't see the adult world as being all that much different, really. Hopefully, most of us have our shit together and practice more tolerance. Ultimately, it's up to teachers and parents to create an environment where their student or child feels comfortable in his or her own skin. And it's up to the rest of us to set an example for acceptable behaviour.

Were you a misfit as a teenager? What is it that made you into a writer? Do you think that becoming a writer (or any other kind of artist) is a choice that one makes? Or is it something inborn and therefore unavoidable? If you weren't a writer, what other kind of work might appeal to you?

I was a misfit. But a likable misfit, I think. I don't know how much that may have played a factor in me becoming a writer. It may have given me some frame of reference. But I've always wanted to be a writer. I've been lucky in that I knew what I wanted to do from a very young age. I sucked at a lot of stuff, but writing was the one thing I could count on. As far as choices, I think everyone has the choice to pursue their dream or not. It can be a bit scary, but the rewards are worth it. If I wasn't into writing, I would totally be a wardrobe consultant on Facts of Life. OK, my timing is a bit off, but hey, a guy can dream. Those uniforms were just horrible! Who puts a teenage girl in a burgundy skirt and vest? Where's the sex appeal in that?