

Task for *Evil Genius*

In the author's own words...

So often when we read great books it gets you wondering about the person behind the ideas, the inspiration for a narrative and how much, if any, of the novel comes from personal experience. It's wonderful when you write to a famous author in the hope you might get an answer and you actually do get a response; it's even better when the author is as open, honest and engaging as Catherine Jinks!



In *Evil Genius* you explore themes of not belonging in relation to being gifted and talented or living with conditions such as Asperger Syndrome or Cerebral Palsy. Who or what was the inspiration for your characters?

The inspiration for Cadel Piggott was actually Elijah Wood as Frodo in the Lord of the Rings. When I saw him, I thought he looked like a bona-fide angel, and I wondered what would happen if someone who looked like that wasn't a very nice person. I figured he could get away with anything, because he looked so innocent. Then I put that idea together with another idea I'd had about a university of evil. And that's how it all started.

What is your opinion about the fact that being gifted can create obstacles to belonging and how much of your own experience is reflected in the novel?

There are a lot of things that create obstacles to belonging: being gifted is only one of many. I grew up in Papua New Guinea, in a culture that wasn't mine, and I never felt that I belonged. I also moved schools a lot – same thing. Other isolating factors include physical illness, dysfunctional family...the list is endless. If you're a gifted person in an environment where brains and their various manifestations aren't appreciated, then you're certainly going to feel isolated. When I was young, I was regarded as a bit of a freak in certain circles because I read books a lot. My pin-ups (literally) were Henry VII and Sherlock Holmes, which made me a bit 'different'. Luckily, however, I had some eccentric friends, so I wasn't alone. There seems to be less of a stigma attached to bookish pursuits now – and nerds, of course, rule the world these days. I think being gifted is less isolating than it used to be in certain parts of the world but not in others. You wouldn't want to be a gifted young girl in societies where girls are supposed to be wives and housekeepers...

Are there any other major themes explored in the novel you feel are important to explore?

Certainly 'belonging' is a major theme in the book, partly because it's all about finding some sort of family. Most of my books are about people without family who cobble together a family out of non-relatives. I guess it's my version of safety.

Cadel's journey is a classic bildungsroman that effectively represents his moral development from anti-hero to a young man with a more socially responsible outlook. Were you deliberately following the bildungsroman formula?

No, I've never heard of a bildungsroman! I'm afraid my choices tend to be very instinctive, and I knew that if I started off with a wicked young boy, he would have to change into something else.

What are your views on 'Young Adult' literature and representations of morality?

Representations of morality in 'Young Adult' literature? Well, I fear I don't read much of it – and since I started writing it, the boundaries have changed. What used to be 'young adult' is now 'older children', while 'young adult' has strayed into areas I've only tackled in my adult books. I seem to be writing for a younger audience than 'young adult' these days and, speaking personally, my children's books have always promoted the idea that there's good in most people (even vampires) and you should look beyond the stereotypes. That's simply because good characters come out of putting yourself in another person's shoes. Even the villains in *Evil Genius* have a pretty sound philosophy behind what they're doing; the world is a mess, and a lot of it is because stupid people have too much power. So you can understand Prosper's motives. And from there it's just a short jump to sympathising – especially since he has an Achilles heel, which is basically love. You can't help warming to someone who loves someone else.

***Evil Genius* is a narrative in which morality is represented as complex and ambiguous through characters such as Thaddeus Roth. One of the exceptional features of this novel is that you are able to explore morally ambiguous situations while still creating empathy for the characters. How difficult was it to find this balance?**

I've always admired stories where even 'bad' people are simply doing what they do because they're making the best of the situation they're in. Like the pirate in 'Captain Phillips', for instance, or Tony Soprano. Real-life situations are usually very complex, and it's not always easy to know what the right thing to do is. So morally ambiguous stories are probably more useful to kids than black-and-white ones.

I don't find it very difficult to strike this balance because I'm usually not thinking about it; I'm simply trying to imagine myself into another person's headspace. That can sometimes be hard, but not necessarily because the character is morally ambiguous.

There are a number of areas: accounting, science and IT where you needed to sound like an expert in order to create a realistic narrative. Did you have any prior knowledge in these areas or did you spend a lot of time researching?

Evil Genius required a huge amount of research, because I am an utter simpleton when it comes to computers. Why I ever thought I could write a book about a computer genius is beyond me; the technical stuff was the difficult part, not the character development. Luckily, I was trained as a journalist, and journalists always have to sound like experts when they're not. What's more, for the second and third books I drew on the expertise of a computer genius

friend who's also very creative: Richard Buckland. Richard actually appears in the third book. I admire him enormously.

How much of the technical language you include in the novel is real?

Generally speaking I try not to stray too far from the path of reality, especially when I'm writing fantasy – which is always more believable if you root it deeply in the real world. So most of the jargon I use is the real thing.

The setting for educational institutions like Crampton College and the Axis Institute are very effective. How much, if any, of your own high school and/or tertiary experiences are reflected in the novel?

I did draw on my own high school and university experiences for Crampton College and the Axis Institute. Now that my daughter has been through high school, and is starting to attend university, I might draw more on her experiences if I were ever to write something similar again. But as with every setting in every one of my books, my job is to take what information I have and create a fake location in my head. So the Axis Institute isn't Sydney University – it's an amalgam of Sydney University and other places, fused into something new. Unless I can see a location, with my mind's eye, I can't write about it. I have a very visual imagination.

(Interview with Alison Byrne April, 2016, reproduced with the permission of Catherine Jinks.)

Writing activity:

As you can see, Catherine Jinks is not only a great author, she is also an interesting person. For this task, see what else you can find out about her and write a short biography.

Before you begin, think about what you **need** to include in a biography:

- age,
- family,
- where she lives,
- what she does for a living.

Then there's what you might **want** to include in your biography:

- the things that interest you about her,
- her career,
- the other books she has written.

You can use the comments Catherine Jinks has made in the interview above but you will also need to conduct your own research. Here are a few websites to get you started.

- [Catherine Jinks' website](#)
- [Wikipedia: Catherine Jinks](#)
- [Catherine Jinks' biography](#)