



A Club for Kids Who Love Books

Louis Sachar on *Holes*

The author talks about his Newbery-winning book, *Holes*, and its movie counterpart.

GETTING STARTED

***Holes* seems to be as much about a place as about the characters. Is that your feeling?**

Yes. While every other story I'd written had begun with the characters, to me this story has always been about a place — Camp Green Lake. The story began with the place, and the characters and the plot grew out of it.

Where did you get the idea for *Holes*?

No, I didn't live next door to a juvenile correction facility. Actually, I never start with a full idea of what I'm going to write. I usually just start with a piece of a character and then see what develops. In this case, I didn't start with a character; I started writing about Camp Green Lake and it developed from there.... When I started writing *Holes*, I had no idea what I was writing, but it was sort of a reaction to the heat.... And I

just sort of put all those elements together, not really knowing what was going to happen. And as I wrote, the story slowly emerged.

Even the complicated, twisted plot of the many-years-ago curse?

Right, and somewhere along the line, I got the idea that Stanley's family was cursed. And I am sure when I got the idea, I knew that Stanley was going to end up doing something to break the curse.

WRITING HOLES

How long did it take you to write *Holes*?

It occurs to me now that Stanley was sentenced to Camp Green Lake for 18 months, which was exactly how long it took me to write *Holes*. I arbitrarily chose the length of his sentence early on. Maybe on some unconscious level, I knew how long it would take.

Did you find the characters taking on a life of their own as you were writing?

It happens every once in a while when you're writing that certain characters seem to leap off the page and take over the book, and that's what happened with the story of Kate and Sam. I had expected to make Kissin' Kate a complete villain, but when I started writing about her I ended up making her someone else entirely; it surprised me.

What was the hardest part of writing *Holes*?

People often ask me how I managed to tie everything together at the end, but that wasn't the hard part. I knew how everything was going to

fit together. The hard part was laying out the strands throughout the story, telling the story of Kate Barlow and of Elya Yelnats and Elya's son, without it getting in the way of Stanley's story.

FROM THE STORY

Why do you think the book's lead character, Stanley Yelnats, connects with so many children?

Stanley isn't a hero-type. He's a kind of pathetic kid who feels like he has no friends, feels like his life is cursed. And I think everyone can identify with that in one way or another. And then there's the fact that here he is, a kid who isn't a hero, but he lifts himself up and becomes one. I think readers can imagine themselves rising with Stanley.

Are your characters based on people you know?

No, they're not.

Why did Zero admit to Stanley that he stole the shoes when Stanley had no clue that Zero really stole them?

He felt guilty about it. But you can see he kind of was too conflicted to just go right out and say, "You didn't do it, I did." That is a hard thing to do, so it was just bubbling inside him all that time. That's why, when Stanley got in trouble for stealing the seeds, Zero finished digging his hole for him. And then when Zero finally admitted everything to Stanley, Zero thought he was going to die. Zero was really sick and he wanted to get it off his chest before he died.

Where, specifically, did you get the idea for the yellow-spotted lizard?

That was something I threw into the mix at the very beginning, figuring it would make it more exciting. I wasn't quite sure how I would use him in the story. But I began by creating what I thought was an intense and colorful setting, and added the lizard just to throw an element of danger in.

Do you have any experience with juvenile facilities yourself?

No.

So how did you know how to write about that?

It's not a very realistic place. I mean, I don't think there is a juvenile facility where the kids have to dig holes all day and have such crazy guards and wardens. So it's very fictional. It was never my intention to write a story about a juvenile detention facility. It was my idea to write an adventure story about a boy escaping such a place.

MAKING THE MOVIE

Did you have any say in the making of the movie?

I was very involved with the movie. I wrote the screenplay and I was there on the set 80 percent of the time, giving my opinions. I didn't have the final say, that's the director's call, but I certainly had his ear. I was also in a scene.

Which scene?

That's my favorite thing to talk about. Kind of like, you always hear about baseball pitchers always wanting to talk about their at-bats. It was

a real short scene. I was on the screen for maybe two seconds at the most. But in the Old West, Sam, the onion seller, sells me a jar of onion juice to make my hair grow, to rub on top of my head.

In pictures, you're not bald. Did they make you wear one of those bald caps?

Well, no, I am not completely bald, but I have a lot more hair on the side of my head than I do on top. It's funny too because every time I look at myself in a picture, you know, people take pictures of me all the time, I always think, "Gosh, am I really that bald?" And then, when I saw the scene of the movie, I said, "I don't look bald in that."

Do you feel the movie has the same impact as the book?

I hope so. It's very true to the book. As the writer of the book, I can't tell what the impact is anymore because I know the story too well and I am so involved with the movie. I can't tell what the impact is, except that it has been very well received by audiences.

THE DARK SIDE OF HOLES

***Holes* is sweet and charming, but it is also darker and scarier than your other books. The Warden, for example, mixes rattlesnake venom in her fingernail polish and threatens to scratch Stanley. Was it your intention to write a frightening tale?**

My daughter, Sherre, who was in 4th grade when *Holes* came out, surprised me when she told me that the Warden was scary. I had never really thought of the Warden as scary or that the scene as especially disturbing. Rattlesnake venom, well, it's almost cartoonish. It's like a situation from that campy old TV show, *Batman*.

How did you get the idea of rattlesnake venom in the Warden's fingernail polish?

It's hard to remember where different ideas come from, but I think it first started when I originally thought the Warden was going to be the granddaughter of Kissin' Kate Barlow. And Kissin' Kate always killed the men she kissed. At the time, I may have even considered that her lipstick might be poisoned. So, I wanted to do something along the same lines. Instead of poison lipstick, the Warden had poison nail polish. But then I ended up liking Kissin' Kate Barlow. So, instead I made the Warden the granddaughter of Trout Walker.

How do you decide what is too scary for a child or how far you can go?

Aside from the rattlesnake venom, there were other scenes in the book where I really did struggle with this issue. There was a scene where Kate Barlow, a notorious outlaw, is being tortured by these two people who have captured her to find out where she buried the treasure. Most of the time, my judgments are based on instinct and experience. I don't, for instance, experiment with kids to find out if I've gone too far.

REFLECTING ON THE BOOK

The book is very funny, but in an offbeat way.

Yes. Sometimes when I start reading, people aren't quite sure if this is a humorous book or not, and they're not sure whether to laugh at first, and then gradually, people start laughing.

Is this a story that has any meaning or is it just for entertainment?

It's written for entertainment, but part of my definition of entertainment, especially with reading, is to have meaning. At least the books I love are ones that really make me think and provoke all kinds of feeling. And so there are meanings there. I didn't set out to teach a lesson, I set out to entertain, and whatever messages are there grew out of the story.

What are some of those messages, in your mind?

I would say the importance of trusting yourself, standing up for your friends, then the broad issues of racial equality, anti-discrimination, and the importance of learning to read.

When *Holes* won both the 1998 National Book Award and the Newbery Medal, which was the first children's book to do so, what did that mean for you, personally and professionally?

It was a great satisfaction to be recognized like that, but awards don't mean as much to me as just people liking the book. You know, it means some committee likes the book, and that's nice, but it also means more if kids like the book.

What do you think makes *Holes* so special?

I think it's a very entertaining story, very exciting story, thought provoking, and a puzzle. And it's not written down to kids, I write for my enjoyment, things that I like, so it respects its readers, treats its readers as intelligent, caring, smart people, and I think it brings out the best qualities of the reader.

What do you mean it brings out the best qualities of a reader?

I think it's the attitude the author has of its reader, it presents characters that caring people should care about. And the book is a puzzle that intelligent people will enjoy solving and the humor grows out of the story and is not directed at any of the characters. They're not laughing at the people. So the qualities it brings out are people's natural compassion for other people and imagination and intelligence.

Of all the books that you have written, why is *Holes* your favorite?

It was a much more challenging story to write; it was a much bigger story than my other books, and by bigger, I don't mean longer in words. I mean it spanned four generations. Part of it took place in Latvia, part of it in the Old West, part of it in current day. [There were] lots of characters. The plot was kind of a great adventure with people escaping from prison and digging up buried treasure. Most of my other books are more character studies rather than big, plotted books. *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* is another one of my favorites, which is really about the story of a troubled kid in school.

Will you write a sequel to *Holes*?

I don't expect to. I feel like the story is completely finished. I don't really have more to add to it.