

Q&A with Joshua David Bellin Author of *SURVIVAL COLONY 9*

***Survival Colony 9* is your debut novel (releasing September 2014) – what do you see as the primary themes or principles of this story?**

The narrator of my story, fourteen-year-old Query Genn, suffers from traumatic memory loss. So one huge theme is memory and the ways it's tied to identity. But I'm interested not only in individual memory but in cultural memory—how and what we remember as a people. The world of *Survival Colony 9* is a post-apocalyptic landscape in which much of the past has been swept away and very few people are old enough to remember it. So in that sense, *all* the characters are suffering from traumatic loss. The question of how people can survive under such circumstances—and not only survive, but care enough to fight for the future—is a driving theme of the narrative.

How did the story come to you? Was there a particular inspiration for writing it?

Believe it or not, the basic outlines—desert landscape, teen with memory loss—came to me in a dream. But the true inspiration for the story was my own children, with whom I started reading YA novels when they came of age. I discovered so many great stories, I said to myself, “I wonder if I could do this?” And the idea of writing a book my own children could read was a great motivator!

Are the characters you created based on any real-life people that you know or are they entirely fictional? What made you characterize them the way you did?

There's a father-son relationship at the heart of *Survival Colony 9*, and since I'm both a father and a son, there's no question that played a role in the writing. But the relationships I have with my own father and son are nowhere near as contentious as the father-son relationship in my novel. Characters develop organically to meet the needs of the story; I can't predict beforehand what my characters are going to be like, any more than I can predict what a person I meet in real life is going to be like. Discovering the characters as the story unfolds brings excitement to the tale you're telling.

What was the most difficult part in writing *Survival Colony 9*?

One of the hardest parts was creating the monsters in my story, creatures I call the Skaldi. I love monsters—always have since I was a kid watching movies like *King Kong*—and so I knew I wanted my monsters to be both horrifying and convincing, or horrifying *because* they're convincing. But it's not easy to create a brand-new life form, especially one that fits into the larger world in a plausible way. In the case of the Skaldi, they're very mysterious; no one knows what they are, where they come from, and so on. So I had to work on two quite different things at once: the *reality* of the Skaldi, and human *beliefs* about the Skaldi that grew out of fear and lack of information. It took a very long time, and multiple drafts, before I was able to develop this dual focus to my satisfaction.

If you could only tell your readers one thing about the story that would convince them to buy the book, what would it be?

Everyone who's read the book has said that one of its greatest strengths is its unpredictability: the plot keeps finding ways to surprise and amaze you. I think that's as good a recommendation for any book as you can get!

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As a science fiction writer, how did you go about building your world?

To build a convincing sci-fi world, you have to think very logically, starting from what we know about our own world—not only science and technology, but everything from climate to physical laws to social systems. To give one example, in the desert world of *Survival Colony 9*, food and water are scarce. So the search for things to eat and drink is pretty much constant, and the survival colonies are small and mobile to maximize the chance of finding sustenance. But the Skaldi are out there, so you can't just camp by a water source, which means you have to figure out ways to collect water without being ambushed. And so on. All the parts have to fit together to make the world believable as a whole.

As a full-time college professor and an author, how do you find time to do both? Is there anything about being an educator that has been helpful in your writing?

One of the great things about having an academic schedule is that there are large stretches when I'm not teaching. That's hugely important for me, as I'm not the kind of writer who can produce anything worthwhile in ten spare minutes. But it's still a challenge, because teaching isn't the only part of my job: there's preparing for class, grading papers, and more generally, keeping current in my field. Luckily, since my field is literature, a lot of what I read gives me ideas for writing. And also luckily, since I teach lots of composition, I'm always thinking about the written word.

Where and when do you like to write, and do you spend time writing each day? What's your writing method - do you believe in outlining?

I wish I could write every day, but it's just not feasible. I've got a full-time job, I'm married and have two children, and—to be honest—writing isn't the only thing I enjoy. I used to feel guilty if I didn't write every day, but now I accept that I can't write well without a full life to surround it.

As far as my method goes, I'm a firm believer in letting the writing process lead you where it will. My best ideas emerge during the act of creation. I don't know where they come from, but I'm content to optimize the chance that they'll come, which for me means *not* planning beforehand and keeping an open mind during the writing process.

What's your best tip for aspiring children's book authors?

I advise aspiring writers to get outside themselves. Everyone's heard the advice "write what you know;" but one of my favorite teachers told me to "write what you *want* to know." If you write only what you know, you're not going to get far; none of us knows all that much. But if you write what you *want* to know, the entire world is open to you. I find this advice particularly valuable for children's book writers, since writing for young people is about opening up vistas for your readers. Write what *you* want to know, and chances are you'll be writing what *readers* want to know too.

What is your next project? And what was your inspiration for writing it?

I'm currently working on the third book in a series that completes Query Genn's story. Once I wrap that up, I plan to return to a project that's been in the back of my mind for a long time: an alternative history that uses John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry as a point of departure. I'm fascinated by Civil War history, and I'm also intrigued by the idea of reimagining Brown's story through the eyes of the young people, African-American and white, who stood by him. This will be a YA novel, with youthful narrators juxtaposed against the much older—and dangerously charismatic—Brown. It'll be a huge departure from the Query books, but since it's alternative history, it'll still give me a chance to do what I love to do most: dream up fantastic scenarios and watch them play out on the page.