

As I Sit Here Writing

Adrian Fogelin

As I sit here in my writing room, someone is bouncing a ball in the street. A dog is barking. The sounds that come through my windows keep me in touch with the neighborhood on which I base the fictional world of my Young Adult novels. The separation my room provides gives me the necessary distance that makes writing possible. As Virginia Woolf once observed, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." In my experience, the former can be done without; the latter is essential.

I first acquired a room of my own in the fourth grade when my family left a wooden, two-story in Pearl River, New York, where I shared a room with my sister. When we moved to a three bedroom, split-level in Princeton Junction, New Jersey, one of the three bedrooms was mine. Behind my closed door I wrote poems, drew pictures, read, and dreamed up scenarios that would lead to my marrying Beatle, George Harrison. If I had been asked what I was doing, I would probably have given the standard kid answer, "Nothing." That only meant that what I was doing was embarrassing, and too hard to explain. Alone in my room I was inventing my separate self, living a secret life that belonged only to me.

Fortunately, a closed door was respected in my family. My parents were often together, but each did things alone as well. My father went birding or worked in the vegetable garden when he wanted to think. My mother wrote fiction. The evidence of *her* secret life was scattered around the house, small piles of manuscript pages left here and there — each with a pencil nearby for spur-of-the-moment editing. My brother, sister, and I all learned the habit of going off by ourselves to work on projects of our own invention.

Because our neighborhood was safe, we had another kind of freedom in our off-school hours; the freedom (within set boundaries) to roam. One of the summer sounds I remember best is the slap of the screen door closing behind me.

I suspect that most readers of this article had that kind of time as children, and that they remember chanting that famous plaint of summer, "I am sooooo bored." More often than not, defeating boredom called forth creative solutions: start a club, draw a picture or, as my friend, Debbie and I once did, attempt to read the complete works of William Shakespeare. Lying, belly-down on my bed, we struggled with unfamiliar language. I remember being stopped by the word "solemnities," which we interpreted as solomn nighties.

The richness of off-time persists in my novels. Readers of my stories may notice that I always write about kids when

they are on vacation from school. This is because I want readers to hang out with characters who are, to a large extent, free to invent what they will do next. If the hyper-scheduled, modern version of childhood leaves adolescents short on unstructured time, then one of my goals in the stories I write is to advocate for its reintroduction.

It may take years for the value of free time to manifest itself, but "doing nothing" is essential for the messy, erratic development of creativity. Although George Harrison and I never got together, I'm sure that imagining the prospect, in all its infinite variations, made me a better storyteller.

Of course I recognize that more creative time is needed in school as well, but time that does not produce an immediate, testable result is something that seems to have been squeezed out of most school curricula. Every teacher I talk to feels the pinch. This Fall, when I taught an in-service class on creative writing for English teachers in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, one teacher told me that she had been handed a schedule that included ten minutes a day for creative writing. She looked distressed. She knew it wasn't working and asked for suggestions. I didn't have any. You can't plant a seed and expect a tree ten minutes later. Some things take time.

But I do have a suggestion that may help teachers when they are guiding readers toward their next book. Given the right book, young adults who are pressured in real life, may be able to relax — and think. There are many books that offer this, including mine.

In *Crossing Jordan*, *Anna Casey's Place in the World*, and my new title, *My Brother's Hero*, I immerse readers in a neighborhood where things move more slowly — the neighborhood just beyond my writing room walls in Tallahassee, Florida. The houses, built in the fifties, are small, dwarfed by old live oaks and longleaf pines. Lawns are an exuberant mix of grass and weeds and scattered toys. Neighbors include blue-collar workers and their families, the working poor, retirees, and university students; a racially diverse group. This is an economic demographic that doesn't often show up in fiction. It is neither middle class nor suburban; nor is it inner-city ghetto. Many of the people living here exist in the narrow zone between having just enough, and having too little. This tends to promote involvement and cooperation. I've lent a cup of sugar, shared plants, and helped the woman next door track her runaway daughter. The difficulties and pleasures of community are always present in my stories.

The voices in my novels belong to my neighbors. Charac-



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ters are often based on kids who stop by to check out the fish in my small backyard pond; or chat with me while leaning on bicycle handlebars, bare feet on the hot tar of Marcia Avenue. The neighborhood I portray in my stories is a deliberate effort to create a place which, while not immune to bad things happening, provides characters and readers a sense of safety. In this neighborhood there are durable friendships among the kids who hang together and reliable adults for them to fall back on.

The work of the characters in my stories is twofold. First, they are becoming individuals. Second, they are becoming members of a community. The problems they face along the way are the tough, ethical questions that litter the path to adulthood for all young people.

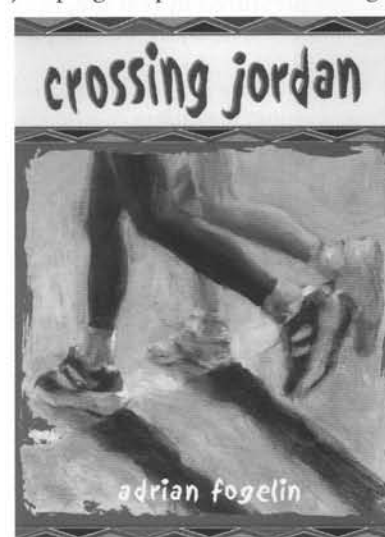
I realize that explaining what I try to do in my stories is like a magician giving away the secret of how to pull the rabbit out of the hat. But teachers — my fellow magicians — already know this trick: engage and entertain your audience and the lesson is learned painlessly. In order to raise ethical questions, the story and characters have to involve readers. The tone can't be preachy or didactic.

My first book, *Crossing Jordan*, starts on a hot summer evening. Cass Bodine, a white, twelve-year-old girl, is handing her father fence nails. The Bodines are getting ready for new neighbors, an African-American family. Cass avoids thinking about the purpose of the fence. If building the fence is the act of a bigot, her father is a bigot.

Cass doesn't know exactly how she feels about black people herself. There are some in the neighborhood, she goes to school with them; they've never been particular friends. But when the new girl, Jemmie Lewis, turns out to be a runner like herself, and perfect best-friend material, Cass discovers that she can't put on her father's beliefs like a hand-me-down sweater. She has to take a critical look. It isn't easy, but she has to strike a balance between her love of her father and a belief system that is incompatible with his. Cass must individuate.

But how about the adult character, Cass's father, Seth Bodine? In the stories I write, no one is irredeemable. Gradually, grudgingly, as circumstances force Cass's father to get to know the family next door, he begins to rethink old beliefs — and so does the family next door.

When read in schools, *Crossing Jordan* has been a good jumping-off point for discussing local race relations. One of



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the best strategies I have heard to bring this work of fiction into the real world involved inviting older members of the African-American community to tell their stories. Kids were amazed to hear that there once was a separate school for blacks — and find out where it once stood, and what it was like to go there.

Anna Casey's Place in the World explores the issue of home and belonging. Anna is an orphan who has been passed through the hands of numerous aunts, uncles, and

a grandmother before being shunted into Florida's foster care system. She has little control over her own life, but that does not mean she is passive. Anna has invented a self that helps her weather the unpredictable, sometimes chaotic life she's been dealt. She keeps what she calls her "explorer's notebook." In it she maps each of the many places she has lived. By mapping the world, she sidesteps the fact that she is unwanted. As an explorer, she identifies herself as someone who belongs everywhere.

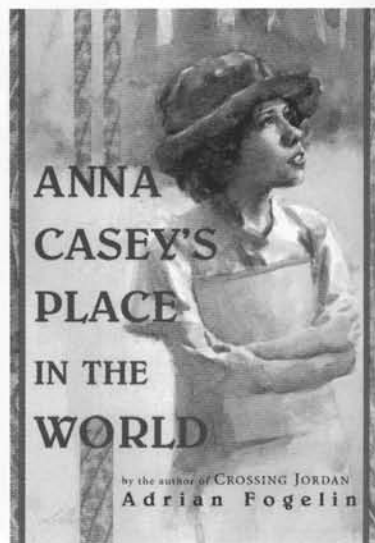
Ben Floyd, who appears in all three of my books, is the hero in *My Brother's Hero*. But the term "hero" turns out to be more ambiguous than Ben imagines. All he wants to do is answer, in the affirmative, the question that afflicts most boys: Am I brave? Spending Christmas break with his family at an uncle's marina in the Florida Keys, Ben has plenty of opportunity to show off his courage. Unfortunately, his natural caution and good sense keep getting in the way.

On the last day of the vacation, Ben, his brother, Cody, and a girl named Mica take a foolish risk. Because they ignore Ben's father's warning to keep their small boat in the sheltered creek between two islands, they find themselves blowing away from shore, night falling fast — and then they run out of gas. At last Ben has the chance to prove himself. But the reality of being brave and the bravery of his fantasies turn out to be completely different. Ben discovers that simply staying alive takes the combined resources of all three of them.

After half a night on the water, they are picked up, and Ben has to deal with the consequences of his misguided heroics. When their rescue is radioed to the Coast Guard boat his mother is aboard, he hears her crying. *The worst sound I ever heard*, he thinks. The agitation he feels is so profound it overshadows any dread he has of being grounded for life. Ben learns from his actions.

The collaborative effort that kept Ben, Mica and Cody alive on the water is not an isolated case in my stories. Success often comes through cooperation. Anna Casey may have little control over her own life, but when the nearby woods she has been visiting is scheduled to be bulldozed, she organizes the neighborhood kids to move as many saplings and small plants as they can. They may not be able to save the woods but, together, they can save something.

Sometimes the problem faced by the group is simply is how to pass the time. But even then, the solutions found by my characters often model collaborative effort. In *Anna Casey's Place in the World* the kids build the Race-A-Rama, a dirt bike track of immense hills and precipitous pits and ditches. If you were to walk back to the power line cut at the edge of my neighborhood, you would see the remains of the kid-built sand track on which the fictional Race-A-Rama is based. Largely filled in now by rains and sand slides, it is like the ruin of some ancient civilization, something of consequence, an achievement.



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In building and operating the track, the kids in *Anna Casey* divide the labor and a social order evolves. Ben Floyd is in charge. Clay, his gadfly antagonist, goads him to make the holes deeper, wider, more dangerous. Leroy, Jahmal, Justin and a kid called the Weeble fill out the cadre of racers. When the track is done, Anna, Cody, Cass and Jemmie provide the necessary audience. A race at the Race-A-Rama is markedly different from the organized sports adults orchestrate. It is freewheeling. Rules are imposed by the participants. It is an exercise in community.

But young characters in my stories don't rely solely on themselves or other kids. They have a strong web of adults who provide guidance. As society streamlines and we run more and more in age-segregated packs, I strive to portray a community in full. It is their relationships with older people that give my young characters a sense of safety in their freedom. The matriarch of the neighborhood, who first appears in *Crossing Jordan* is a small, tough African-American woman called Nana Grace, who grandmothers all the children, regardless of color. As Ben Floyd says, "We all have grandmothers we see on holidays. Nana Grace is for the rest of the time."

As I made school visits to talk about *Crossing Jordan* I was surprised when Nana Grace was frequently cited by readers as their favorite character; a bit odd for a book with two vibrant twelve-year-old girls competing for the title. But maybe Nana Grace is the grandmother kids would like to have: strict but kind, always there, never too busy to listen. When she tells Justin, an overweight boy, "You're just gettin' your weight first an' your height second," she is offering an assurance his friends — who call him lard-butt — can't give him. There are times when an adult's perspective helps.

Also in the neighborhood is Miss Johnette, a high school Biology teacher who invites kids into what she calls her "bone museum." Fossils and animal bones, bird nests and dead beetles adorn the shelves in her home. And in her closet — a human skeleton named Edgar. "This is totally creepy," says a visiting ten-year-old boy. But finding the "teachable moment," Miss Johnette gives her visitor a quick lesson in natural history — and where to get a skeleton without robbing a grave.

Mr. Barnett is the neighbor the kids know is "home on disability." A constant presence, he keeps an eye on the neighborhood. In *Anna Casey* there is even a homeless Vietnam Veteran named Sam Miller who provides an unlikely friendship for foster child, Eb Gramlich. Eb, who protects himself by being as closed as a clenched fist, receives this prickly, but useful bit of advice from Mr. Miller: "Life's rough, and it stinks ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, but once in a blue moon, something good happens. Listen, Eb, when some good thing wants to happen to you, you let it, understand?"

The community in my books includes the dogs that live behind every fence, barking with the front end, wagging with the back, as well as Fran and Blackie, dogs who roam the neighborhood, happy to walk along with any kid who is going to school or the convenience store — where Mr. G., the Indian gentleman behind the counter knows everyone by name.

For those who feel this place I write about is too rosy to be an accurate depiction of modern life, I'd say that the cold,

gritty, impersonal cities, and the slick, mall-dominated suburbs that form the settings for many YA novels are also narrowly selected; just a slice of all the possible childhoods.

There are reasons to create a nurturing setting like my neighborhood. In order to survive adolescence kids must be resilient and hopeful, attributes I believe can be encouraged and even taught. A steady diet of dark, unsettling novels may, inadvertently, feed the feelings of isolation and insecurity that often accompany adolescence. And consider for a moment the stories being told to young people by sources other than books. They are bombarded by unrealistic, fast-paced, often violent stories on TV, the movies, and video games; stories that are long on action, short on consequences.

For all their cool and sophistication, kids live parochial lives. They know their immediate circle of friends and family, a fixed constellation of teachers. Often the only other views they have of reality come to them in the form of stories. Adults are not easily led, but the blasts from the media have an effect on what young people believe to be real, and even on the stories they invent themselves.

When teaching creative writing to young adults, one of the first things I have to do is wean them away from writing stories in which things blow up. I find it telling that young writers rarely write past the "ka-boom!" As in video games, where points are awarded for "killing" the men who run across the screen, disaster has no aftermath. First stories from these new writers rarely spring from the writer's own experience, but they do mimic the stories told by non-print media. Ka-boom!

In my writing I work for a partnership between the reader and my story. I know that a reader must "buy in," and that much of the work of constructing a place and the breathing characters who inhabit it is done by the reader. Because reading is an act of collaboration, one that takes time, I hope that a book can have a more lasting impact than

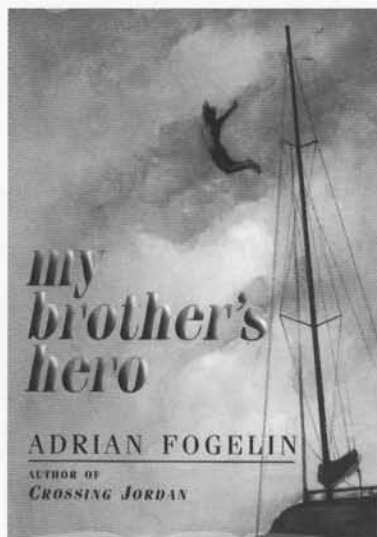
the quick assault of an action-adventure movie. To that end I try to offer characters who are as real to readers as the people they know; characters who can act as peers, even mentors.

The tone of the stories I tell comes out of my own life experience. I am the product of a happy childhood, an optimist. I was taught that the things I do can have a positive affect in the larger world. I give my readers the same message, and it's a message that needs to be heard. Although it has fallen somewhat out of favor, one of the time-honored functions of storytelling is to teach. Societies rise on a foundation of stories. Through stories a community passes on shared values, sets limits, and floats its dreams.

The relationship between society and story is dynamic. Society pushes and shapes story, certainly, but we should never underestimate the power of the story to push back. If we experience something in a book we may yearn for it. And if we yearn for it, who knows, we may roll up our sleeves and build it. I believe that a story can have that much power.

Outside my room rain is now falling. Soon the school bus will pull up next door and spill out half a dozen boys, who will play outside, despite the rain. A ball will sail into my yard. I'll go out and throw it back.

And the next story will begin.



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Brief Reviews of Adrian Fogelin's Adolescent Novels (all published by Peachtree)

Crossing Jordan

Crossing Jordan is a powerful and compelling story of friendship, bigotry and tolerance. Twelve-year-old Cassie narrates the dramatic events of the novel when Jemmie, an African-American girl, and her family move into their blue-collar neighborhood in Tallahassee, Florida. The two girls are drawn together by their competitiveness as runners as well as by their love for reading. Despite their parents' deeply held prejudices, pride, and cultural beliefs, the girls establish a close friendship in which they discover that they share more similarities than differences. They disregard the fence, a symbol of prejudice put up by Cass's father, and bond as sisters. But when their parents find out about their budding friendship, they are forbidden to see one another. Through a turn of life-threatening events, the parents learn that long-held notions of people are unimportant in a time of crisis. By their example, two adolescent girls teach adults how to overcome bigotry and racial intolerance to make "change" possible.

—Reviewed by Tammy Williams-Hinson, Shanks High School, Quincy, FL

Anna Casey's Place In The World

Orphan life has not been a joy for our 12-year old heroine, Anna. Nevertheless, she is a polite, eager to please girl who truly loves the world around her. While death and divorce have taken away all of her relatives, the collection of maps that she keeps in her faithful Explorer's notebook is a constant reminder of each place she has lived. She ends up in foster care in Tallahassee with a distant, first-time foster mother and a 10-year old boy, Eb, who comes from a neglectful home. Set during the summer in the same working-class neighborhood as *Crossing Jordan*, the plot centers on Anna's need for acceptance and permanency. Through various subplots, readers are briefly taken away from the arc of the story as the author embraces the themes of friendship and belonging. Anna and Eb meet the neighborhood kids, Cass and Jemmie—memorable friends in *Crossing Jordan*. They befriend a homeless Vietnam vet, and establish a striking friendship with a biology teacher and local conservationist. Other subplots include an adult romance, the foster brother's long-term placement, and the clearing of the woods (a place that Anna considers to be a part of her home) for a sand mine. Through this genuine and believable first-person narrative, Anna takes the reader on a journey in search of a place where she belongs.

—Reviewed by Tammy Williams-Hinson, Shanks High School, Quincy, FL

My Brother's Hero

In this third novel of Fogelin's sequence, readers get to know Ben Floyd and his younger brother Cody. We are also introduced to one of the spunkiest female characters to appear in an adolescent novel in quite a while: Mica Delano. The story centers around the Floyds' Christmas adventure: a trip to the Florida Keys, where they tend a rickety marina that Ben's aunt and uncle own. At the marina, "the brothers" meet the almost indomitable Mica, a know-it-all 11-year-old who swims and fishes better than the boys, and is never shy about displaying her talents. Mica lives on a boat with her father, a disillusioned, now-single marine biologist who, though he clearly loves his daughter, drinks too much and occasionally ignores her. It is only when Mica's feelings are hurt by her father's inattention that her longing for a mother's love becomes apparent. Mr. and Mrs. Floyd understand her needs. However, Ben, who is jealous of Cody's fondness for Mica and unhappy that a girl has taken center stage in his family's vacation, does not want her to get too close to his family.

Readers of *Crossing Jordan* will be especially eager to follow the subplot that involves Ben's and his best friend Cassie's Christmas gifts for each other. This year, the gifts are a symbol of more than friendship; a romance is about to bud. Before that subplot is resolved, though, Ben, Cody, and Mica must work together to survive a night in which they become lost on the ocean in a tiny rubber vessel. They survive the ordeal only by working together, without jealousy or showing off. This is an engaging, uplifting book that treats young adolescents with respect and offers them a sense of possibility and hope.

Teachers will find terrific potential for including this novel in an interdisciplinary unit on the ocean and shore. Mica and her father introduce readers to many Latin terms for flora and fauna; students will enjoy learning and expanding the list of terms, and diving into information about the Keys.

—Reviewed by Sissi Carroll, Florida State University

Quotes by Adrian Fogelin

From *Crossing Jordan*

It's a funny thing. If you look hard for a while at someone you know really well, it seems like you're looking at a total stranger. I looked at Daddy like I'd never seen him before and wondered, is this what a bigot looks like?
— Cass Bodine

I guess she thought she'd leave me in the dust, but I ran along with her. Our strides were identical. Our knees and elbows rose and fell together. She wasn't trying for that. I wasn't either. Each of us was trying our hardest to pull ahead. In science class last year we learned that some stars revolve around each other, caught in each other's gravity. We were like that, caught, and neither one of us could break away.
— Cass Bodine

"Doing the right thing ain't always comfortable."

— Nana Grace

"My dad used to say that being black was like carrying something heavy all the time, something you couldn't ever set down. If you're black, he said, you could work hard, but at the end of the day, all you got was tired."
— Jemmie Lewis

From *Anna Casey's Place in the World*

I've seen quite a bit for twelve, lived lots of places with aunts and uncles and cousins. But relatives aren't like parents. They don't have to keep you if they get divorced, or if they need your room for a new baby, or if their arthritis gets bad. They just pass you along until, one day, you run out of relatives. Then you have to go with someone like Mrs. Riley. Mrs. Riley is a social worker for the State of Florida. I was one of her cases. So was Eb.
— Anna Casey

Grandma died when I was eight — one of the top worst things that ever happened to me. After the funeral I ran down to the pond behind her house and grabbed a rock from the bank. It was nice and flat. My cousin Janice wanted to skip it across the pond, but I put it in my pocket. I've done the same thing in each place since — picked up a stone to help me remember.
— Anna Casey

Eb was about to wake up, but he was fighting it. Wherever he was, it was better than the place he would be when he woke up. When he woke up, he'd be back in his own life.
— about Eb

"Best I can do is stay away from people. Lucky thing there are places nobody cares about, throwaway places like this one." Mr. Miller cleared his throat and spat over the arm of the chair. "In general, people like to stay on roads, walk on sidewalks, follow signs. They're not over-curious."
— Sam Miller, homeless Vietnam vet

From *My Brother's Hero*

I wanted to *do* something. But being thirteen and a half isn't about doing. It's about waiting. Waiting to get a license. Waiting to get a car. Waiting around.
— Ben Floyd

I sat down on the curb, folded my hands behind my head, and lay back in the grass. The fronds of the palms in front of the diner clattered in the warm breeze, a sound I didn't hear at home. As I looked up into the dark, starry sky, I felt like I was expanding. The neighborhood and the kids I spent every single day with seemed as small and far away as the stars.
— Ben Floyd

"Family hug!" Cody shouted. He threw his arms around Mica from behind. "Dad? Ben?"
— Cody Floyd

"When all else fails, think."
— Mike Floyd

"You know, Ben. There's a fine line between being brave and being stupid," Dad said. "Nothing wrong with knowing the difference."
— Mike Floyd

Mica's finger traced a line across the sky."The first bright star you come to is the north star. That's the star sailors steer by. It doesn't change positions with the seasons. The captain and I use it when we're running at night."
— Mica Delano

I knew some of the things Cass wished for: a room of her own, fewer freckles, college, the Olympics. But maybe sometimes she made a wish with my name in it, maybe tonight. I hunted around for that same first star. It was still pretty light, but I found it and wished. I won't say for what, but her name was in it.
— Ben Floyd