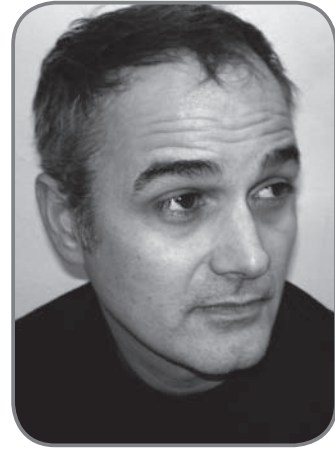


i Infoblätter



© Beth Rosenberg

INTERVIEW MIT BLAKE NELSON

»HE IS ALL ALONE!«

Blake Nelson about his idea to write »Paranoid Park«, his favourite character and van Sant's film

? *Blake, how did you come to start writing young adults' literature?*

I love teenagers, I love thinking about them, I love remembering what it was like to be one. I think it is by far the most interesting time of a person's life. Your first love. Your first adventures. Your first exposure to music and culture. Having those first real friendships. And then going to University and leaving home. It's such an epic journal. It's amazing. Maybe getting married and having kids is on the same level. But to me, the teen years, this is when you form yourself. This is when you become who you will be forever. Everyone's a hero when they're 17. Everyone is facing the mysteries of existence. The dangers of committing yourself. It is an epic time.

? *Do you write by hand or with a computer?*

I have written every way there is. I started writing by hand. Then by typewriter, then word processor, then computer. Recently, I had to write the beginning of a new book by writing emails to myself. Because I was on a friend's computer and he didn't have Microsoft Word! I hear in Japan they now have novels written in text messages. I guess I use whatever's easiest. Right now the computer is the easiest.

? *For which age group do you like writing the most?*

I like writing for older teens. I feel like they are the ones who are really feeling the weight of the world in a way that younger teens don't quite have to. I really can't think of a time that is more crucial, and

exhilarating, and unnerving as when you're 17 or 18, you make HUGE decisions during that time. In some ways you have to figure out who you are and then act on it, and it's not like you've been around that long.

When I think how brave I was at 16 and 17 to begin to think of myself as an artist. When I was 21 I dropped out of college and moved to New York City. I don't know where I found the courage. I was from a small town, so it was very scary. I felt destiny calling me. That's what happens when you're in that late teens stage. Destiny calls you.

? *Where did you get the idea to write »Paranoid Park«?*

I wanted to write about a kid under great stress but who was outside the parameters of his parents and society. In America, right now, parents are very involved in kid's lives. They think their kids don't have any secrets or have lives that exist outside their control. But they do! Teenagers always have their own reality that their parents can't really know or understand. It is the nature of parents and children that this happens.

So I wanted to show this kid really ripped apart from everyone by this one act he has committed. He is all alone! No one can help! And then just show what happens. In some ways he shows that he is very resilient. In other ways, he knows that existing outside society will exact a terrible price on his soul.

It is a very interesting situation. I really enjoyed writing the book. And I didn't decide ahead of time, what he would do. I just kept writing and waited for the character to tell me what he wanted to do.

? *»Paranoid Park« is set in Portland, the city of your childhood and youth. What comes first to your mind when you think of Portland? What do you like about the city, what are your dislikes?*

I love Portland. It is like England in America, in that it is very grey and gloomy and full of interesting young people and millions of cool bands. But it is also a small town and it has some of the ugliness of America. It is very new. And it is isolated from everywhere else. It is a frontier town, still, in many ways.

In some of my other books, I make fun of it, which is easy since I grew up there and know it so well. It is a perfect example of the American Middle Class. It is very ordinary. But since all my ghosts are there, and my youth, and a lot of parts of my recent life, too, I feel like it is very deep in me. Deeper than I know.

? *How long did you work on the text?*

I wrote Paranoid pretty fast. I think I wrote the first draft in about six weeks. And then I did lots of re-writing, about six months worth. This is what I always do: First draft as fast as I can write. Then lots of rewriting.

I worked very hard to make Paranoid seem really ordinary and like the way a teenager would really speak. Sometimes I get criticized for that. Critics say: »Blake is not a very good writer but the story is good.« But I work so hard to make my writing not very good!!!

? *How often did you have to rework or revise the text? Did you end up deleting large parts of the story?*

Sometimes. You always have to be willing to throw stuff away. That's the mark of a pro, your ability to throw huge chunks away.

I have thrown whole books away. Because in the end you only want your very best stuff to be published. You don't want anything that's not GREAT to be out there. Even if you like it for personal reasons.

? *How did you get the information about the skater-scene?*

I did some research, but I like skate culture anyway, and had followed it all along. I love all forms of youth culture. I follow all the latest bands and clothes. It just comes natural to me.

? *Did you consider writing the novel from a different perspective than the one of the skater?*

I wanted the main character to be as ordinary as possible, because I wanted the reader to feel like this could happen to anyone. So I made sure he was only a casual skater. If he was a great skater, it would have effected the story. I just wanted him to be a normal guy, who likes to skate, so in a way, he isn't really a skater at all. He's just a kid who skates.

? *Did you consider other titles for the book?*

No, I loved PARANOID PARK the minute I thought of it, which was pretty much right when I started writing it. There's another park in Portland (not a skate park), known as Paranoid Park. It's a place where punks and street kids hung out in the 90s. I always thought that sounded kind of cool and a little bit ominous PARANOID PARK. So I was excited that I got to use it.

? *Is there a scene or a character you particularly like?*

I like Macy. I like when she and the boy ride home on the bus. She's so cool. But she still loves the boy, I think. She cares about him. Teens are capable of such love for each other. They really watch each other's back. Way more than adults.

? *There are some symbols to be found in the novel, e.g. the descriptions of the weather. Did you use them knowingly or did they come to your mind spontaneously?*

At first you just write. But when you're doing re-writes you eventually figure out why everything is there, and if it should really be. I don't use grey skies as a symbol. That's just what I see when I close my eyes and visualize it. If other people want to think that's a symbol, that's okay.

? *There are some quite cruel scenes in the book. When you were writing, did you think about how much the age group you were aiming at could tolerate?*

Life can be hard for teens. They are still subject to violence by their peers, plus they are scrutinized by cops and their parents. They are expected to act like adults. I think teens like it when you show how it really is for them. It is scary! Most people like to think that teens just stay home and play video games. But I think a lot of teens still want to go out into the world and explore. And inevitably they find good things and bad.

? *The ending of the story is open but positive. Did you also have other versions in mind?*

I did think about trying some different endings. But in the end I went with the one that »popped out«. I love that he never tells anyone. To me that shows a great courage. I just hope it's not too hard on him!

? *How would you like to see your book being used in the classroom?*

As a way to introduce moral ambiguity. And to show that the world is very complicated and not black and white at all. I hope that they will see that this boy is very real, and deals with the situation, like a real boy would. Also, PARANOID is based, somewhat, on CRIME AND PUNISHMENT. And I think it is a good way to show students how different writers take the same basic story and use it to different purposes.

? *How would you rate this book compared to your others?*

I think it is one of my best. It is very intense and I love how some boys who don't even like to read, recognize themselves in this character. He is a very REAL kid. And I am proud of that.

? *What have been your experiences from reading the novel in front of young people e.g. in schools? Which parts do you usually read to them? How do they react?*

I like to read the part when the security guard first dies. Because that is a moment most teenagers are very familiar with. »OH NO! What have I done!« I think the panic and despair the boy feels at that moment, really connect with kids.

? *You were very pleased with the film made by Gus van Sant. Did anything surprise you when you first saw the film?*

Lots of things surprised me. That was part of the fun of it. I am a huge fan of Gus Van Sant, so I was very excited to see what he would do. I was not that concerned that he »follow the book«, I knew he would change things and do an interesting interpretation of what I had done. I loved the movie. And every time I watch it I love it more.

? *What do you have planned next?*

I have a new book, called DESTROY ALL CARS, which is about a young man, 17, who is very concerned with our neglect of the environment. He is super critical of the wastefulness of American culture. But he is very funny, in his critique. He loves Karl Marx. He writes about him a lot. I don't know if German teenagers study Karl Marx but he is one of my favorite thinkers.

Thank you very much, Blake.

Interview: Sabine Jelinek, Marc Böhmman, Regine Schäfer-Munro, August 2009