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Kent Davis is the Montana based author of the Middle Grade fantasy adventure "A Riddle in Ruby" and the soon to be released sequel, "The Changer's Key", both published by Greenwillow Books/HarperCollins. Find him at @kentishdavis or kentishdavis.com.

"After nourishment, shelter, and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world." – Philip Pullman.

I tell stories.

It's certainly not an odd thing for an author to say.

But I guess when I say "I tell stories" I mean that it's the fundamental theme of my life.

I spent my early years in a little town in western Missouri whose main claim to fame is being near an US Air Force base and a college. My father, who had just retired from the service, was pursuing an English teaching degree. My folks were divorced, and we didn't have a ton of money, so when my dad and I were hanging on the weekends and he had a particularly heavy homework load we would go to the library. He used to kind of... I have to admit... how to say this... use the library as day-care.

Yes, Dear Librarians, I was one of those kids. On behalf of us all, thank you for being so understanding about the food stains.

And there I am in this college library—age seven-ish—and my dad's doing his thing: whatever, learning. I don't actually mind the learning, or his distraction, because this leaves me with a sizeable window of opportunity. However, when I slip through this tantalizing portal, I do not choose mayhem. Nor do I choose mischief. I choose the most fabulous experience offered to a bookish kid, ever: wandering about in the stacks. The book canyons smell funny, the light is flicker-y and dim, and the deeper you go, the mystery grows ever and exponentially thicker. I hadn't read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* at that point, but it was easy for me to imagine that if I just followed the stacks far enough back into the maze-like depths, I would find myself in another world.

This is exactly what happened.

I stumbled across a copy of *Bulfinch's Mythology*. Wrapped in its musty powder blue cloth cover it was tucked into the bottom shelf at the farthest end of the farthest row of stacks, right next to the emergency stairs where my dad would sneak a smoke now and again.

The first line of the author's preface reads:

If no other knowledge deserves to be called useful but that which helps to enlarge our possessions or to raise our station in society, then Mythology has no claim to the appellation.

Hear, hear, Mr. Bulfinch.

It probably would have taken my six year-old self a few hours and a dictionary to translate the single sentence, but here's my current best shot:

Stories are important. Stories make us better.

And especially stories like *these!* Athena, Ariadne, Artemis. King Arthur and Guinevere and Lancelot in a love triangle that matches the tragedy and pathos of anything George Martin has (as yet) articulated. Sprinkled with the wackadoo stylings of Roland and Charlemagne, and I was hooked. I read it into the ground. I ate it like candy. Finding *Bulfinch* was the flint that sparked my enduring love for the fabulous and mythological.

Sometimes I think "what if I hadn't found that book in that library?" Shuddering. Moaning. Juvenile Delinquent-ing.

I certainly wouldn't have encountered Arthur's magical sword Excalibur, or Roland's Durandal, or Beowulf's Hrunting. I must tell you that I have retained a certain preoccupation with literary weapons. We could call it an obsession, I suppose. My wife does.

Anyway, in addition to cherishing mythological choppers, from that day onward I also treasured libraries and those books that opened portals to ever more complex, exciting, and unexpected worlds. In *The Three Musketeers* Alexandre Dumas introduced me to the free-wheeling adventures of the idealistic farm boy D'Artagnan and his hilariously practical valet, Planchet. *Frankenstein* offered Mary Shelley's searing look at the question of what it is to be human. I cried for the monster. I still do. *Waiting for Godot* seared into my brain Samuel Beckett's absurdly, madly, deeply funny look into the existentially foundational flailings of Didi, Gogo, and Lucky. Those Saturdays were a glorious time, my friends. I was the lord of my domain, wandering among the bookshelves, unburdened by section headings, advice, or even (delicious!) supervision.

That odd catalog of stories, delivered to me by some strange providence, shaped me in ways I'm still discovering.

I didn't aim to write books, though. My first love was the theater. I was, and still am, smitten by those stories that flash fire in front of you and burn out their brilliant, ephemeral lives. At three in the morning in my junior year of college, hanging upside down from a lighting grid, I blew off a pre-law paper so we could finish the lighting plot for opening night. I shrugged off a possibly more lucrative future involving suits and laws—sorry Mom—and threw myself into acting. I cut my teeth with professional theaters in college, found a way to graduate school, and worked for years in the theater as an actor, then eventually as a director and playwright.

All the time, without realizing it, I was journeying further into this forest of the kind of stories I love.

It's an odd thing, trying to take apart a story from the inside.

But that's what actors and directors do. You're given these clues in the form of lines and stage directions, these skeletons of people on a page, and it's your job to authenticize them. Is that a word? It is now. There's that old cliché that every character is the center of their own novel, but some of my best acting mentors taught me that if you don't fully embrace that cliché on stage, you're not doing your job. A good character is nice. They seem authentic, and fill their anticipated role. A great character is hypnotic. They confound expectations, surprise and infuriate and delight. The more I lived with this concept, the more it just resonated with my discoveries from way back when in the library.

And kids know complexity. They're scientists: constantly developing hypotheses about the world, falsifying them through experience, and then developing new ones. That's how we map out being human. That's how we decide the kind of people we want to be. The kids I know have very little patience for a pat answer. They probe, pry, dissect, hammer, juice, and chainsaw at troubling questions, especially if the initial adult response begins with "Well, just because."

My goal in writing for kids is to give them a creatively risky, emotionally complex, vividly exciting terra nova where they can test their ever-evolving theories on that most vital of experiments: the kind of human into which they want to shape themselves.

I read *The Golden Compass* for the first time in my twenties. I was enchanted by Lyra Bellaqua—brilliant, ferocious, troubling, courageous Lyra the Liar. She certainly wasn't my peer. She was twelve. I was twenty-seven. Instead, I identified with her fire, her complexity, her ambiguous feelings for her parents, her impatience with a recalcitrant world. These rang true to me. But, you know, Lyra isn't really a poster child for nice behavior. Noble? Sure. Good? In a primal way, possibly. But nice? Nah.

I've never been a fan of the Chosen One narrative. Maybe it comes from growing up in the middle—middle of the country, middle of the road, middle of the classes—certainly I wasn't born under a star or as the result of a prophecy. My mom showed me as I grew up that

the things I'd receive from the world hinged primarily upon the actions I took. The results of those actions are never guaranteed, though, even for someone like me who is toting around the privilege of a straight white guy. For almost all of us the results include a quite monumental list of failures. A friend of mine put it very succinctly when she said, "We can control our actions. We cannot control their outcomes."

Those are the stories I love: characters thrust into a situation, forced to do the best they can with limited means, served up a platter of spectacular defeats, and then possibly, just possibly, eking out bittersweet victories.

This is also the kind of story I'm trying to tell with the A Riddle in Ruby series. Ruby Teach isn't a Chosen One. She's an apprentice thief, daughter of a fake pirate, and target of nefarious powers in an alternate-history colonial Philadelphia. She faces challenges that I hope seem familiar to many readers: her world is turned upside down by forces she doesn't understand; she makes choices that have difficult consequences; her greatest battles are discovering who she is and deciding who she wants to be.

Part of the fun, though, is that it all happens in a place that is very much not where we live. The Chemystral Age—a kind of Enlightenment/Industrial Revolution mashup, fueled by an arcane science called Chemystry—is piled high with mysterious secret societies, chempunk gadgets like mad gearbeasts and alchemical automatons, rakish smugglers and upside-down towers, laboratory coffee houses and hidden fortresses. It's a particularly American take on a second-world fantasy, and I've tried to pack it with equal parts pluck and gumption.

What fantasy allows us readers to do is to explore human questions in a way that heightens that experience, hopefully in tandem with some stuff that is really cool. When I was a kid and read *Frankenstein*, for example, what kept me forging forward was equal parts deep sympathy for the monster, and wonder at how super-awesome and icky it was that this guy was running around made out of parts of other, dead, people! There's a kind of wonderful masking that goes on when one is reading in an alternate world. Especially, I think, for younger readers. It's like looking at a solar eclipse through a camera obscura. We can comfortably consider primal human questions that would burn our eyes out if we stared at them straight on.

Terry Pratchett, one of the all-time masters of disguising the fundamentally human in trappings of delightful whimsy, put it pretty well when he said,

Really, a good fantasy is just a mirror of our own world, but one whose reflection is subtly distorted.

I couldn't agree more.

The younger me might add from his perch in the rear of the stacks. "Subtle mirror, fine. But make sure it's weird and awesome, too."

Challenge accepted.

