

This Can Be Happening to Gordon Korman

BY MARYLYNN MILLER OKE



Gordon Korman takes his characters on very different journeys: Luther the Doberman searches for his beloved owner; a beleaguered boy sets sail on the ill-fated *Titanic*; and a car thief, gang member and murderer run from consequences.

He also asks the big questions. Just how did the underwear cross the road anyway?

Luckily, the nimble, genre-hopping imagination of Gordon Korman has the answers. As middle-grade and teenage fans around the world navigate the precarious school hallway and the unpredictable path of growing up, they are glad he does.

Remember that kid who wrote his first book at 12?

This is the guy. Thanks to an assignment unceremoniously doled out by his seventh-grade track coach conscripted to teach English, Gordon sent out the resulting manuscript to

Scholastic Canada. After all, as the classroom book-order monitor, he concluded he was “practically an employee” of the publisher.

Along with the unfettered logic of youth, he struck gold.

“When I first started, I assumed that I was writing for kids because I was a kid,” states Gordon. “Then I wrote about teenagers. It seemed natural that I would eventually write for adults. I’m not that interested in it. I love the kids’ book business.”

After two agonizing years of waiting, *This Can’t Be Happening at Macdonald Hall*, featuring the escapades of Bruno and Boots, was published — and a decades-long career was born. However, there is so much more to the story of Gordon Korman than that.

Things seem to be working out

Now, with more than 80 books to his name, the *New York Times* (NYT) best-selling author proves time and time again that the pivotal process of coming into your own still resonates.

Ever since his adolescent novel debut in 1978, Gordon has sold more than 28 million books in multiple languages around the world.

Although he fondly recalls “G Man” as the best nickname he ever had, he simply describes himself as a regular guy. A regular guy who transports his readers into the goofy, the adventurous, the mysterious and back again, through his trilogies, series and stand-alone works.

What was this guy like as a kid?

Gordon feels the genre cut its teeth on classic middle-grade novels such as *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* and the *Mad Scientists’ Club*. It seems his early years in Montreal as an only child, living in a two-family house with his cousins, heavily influenced the writer he was to become.

“I had an older cousin who was like my big brother. He was cool and fearless. Like they say about Odysseus, ‘skilled in all ways of contending.’ He was my Bruno and I was Boots. So, a lot of the characters that I have written about, particularly early in my career, follow that pattern — the main guy and the sidekick. On the other hand, Cervantes, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza never knew my cousin and me.”

He recalls the freedom he had as a teenager in Toronto, exploring the city with friends.

“It was nothing for us to ride the subway and spend the day hanging around Yonge Street, which was the thing to do in the ‘70s when you were a Toronto teenager.”

Taking control

We all remember the books, movies and music that rocked our world when we were young. Not to mention the first crushes and the horror of being embarrassed by our parents. We also learned to think for ourselves.

"What I love specifically about this age group is that this is the first time in your life that you become in charge of your own opinion," reflects Gordon, referring to his book *No More Dead Dogs*, as young Wallace faces detention for criticizing *Old Shep, My Pal*. Like Gordon, he doesn't like sad, boring books where the dog always dies at the end.

In stark contrast to his typical fans, Gordon says his own teenage daughter likes his books but loves anything that wins critical literary awards.

"We all have our own kind of thing. They choose what they like just like we did."

Stakes well done

"For me, it's always a good story. I'm trying to entertain first before I do anything else."

Gordon is the creator of several adventure series, including the Hypnotists and *NYT* bestselling Masterminds. He also introduced kid-friendly characters such as Max Carmody from *Maxx Comedy: The Funniest Kid in America*. His love for transcending genres is evident. However, it all comes down to telling a compelling tale.

"In a series like *Island* or *Everest*, or even something more speculative like *Masterminds*, the high stakes of life and death are obviously assets within the book. But if a book is well written, the stakes can be much lower, like a kid finding his place in his world, at school, in his family or in his own mind. It isn't necessarily worse or even smaller, it's just different."

Is comedy really the lower art form?

Unlike Aristotle, Gordon doesn't think so. Although he also loves adventure, Gordon will admit that comedy is his first love. Nose-picking aliens are proof positive of that.

"As a kid, when the grown-ups were around the dinner table, I admired the guy who could tell a really good joke and make everyone else laugh. When I started writing, which was certainly not intended to launch a career, it was very natural for me that a good story would be funny."

However, Gordon discovered that the consistent delivery of humour came with its own pressure. When he first started doing the more suspenseful adventure trilogies like *39 Clues*, he felt unexpected relief.

Ironically, he states, "Some of the best humour has come when I was writing something that wasn't supposed to be funny."

Early in his career, Gordon wrote his characters based upon his own life experiences. As he explored other genres, producing works such as *Titanic*, he developed an appreciation for quality adventure and historical-fiction writing — and the extensive research they require.

He wrote that?!

Throughout his career, Gordon has discovered that when he shakes things up, people notice.

"When the *Island* series first came out, a lot of people

wouldn't believe the captain was really dead at the end of the first book because that is not something they would expect from me. Death wouldn't be a plot point that I would fool with one way or the other. If you read a Farley Mowat book about kids lost in the North and suddenly somebody died, you wouldn't say, 'Well, he can't really be dead.'"

Gordon recalls an encounter with a bewildered woman at a Toronto bookstore. His Macdonald Hall books were re-released while his adventure titles were hot and new on the market. She asked why he stopped writing *Island* and *Everest* to start writing Macdonald Hall?"

"From her perception, I started as this adventure guy and suddenly I'm writing these funny boarding school books. Whatever is famous lately is the thing that you're kind of all about."

He learned that writing material for different age groups also stirs the pot.

"When writing books like *Son of the Mob*, *Jake Reinvented* and *Pop* for teenagers, you're going to deal with more honest and racy material than you would in a middle-grade novel."

He doesn't hit his readers over the head

To his surprise, many reviewers felt *Schooled*, his book about a home-schooled boy thrust into middle school, was a great anti-bullying book.

"Now when I look at the book, I think absolutely. I don't know if it's anti-bullying, I mean who's pro-bullying? If I'd had to write an anti-bullying book, it would have been preachy and horrible. So, for me, it's great if there is a message or a theme in there."

Many of Gordon's stories often include themes of empowerment, redemption and, ultimately, friendship. He believes the concept of being an outsider is a really powerful trope for kids, and that we all bring our own life experiences to what we read.

"If you look at a lot of my books, it's the idea of being the person who doesn't fit in, trying to find a way to make it work. Even in the *Swindle* books, the one thing that unites the kids is that they are misfits in their school and in their town."

Unlike the ones in bars, Gordon's opening lines actually work

His characters aren't unintentionally creepy either.

"It's always nice if you can come up with a great opening line for a book that's going to grab someone's attention," said Gordon who recalled a favourite from his teen book, *Born to Rock*. "The thing about a cavity search is this, it has nothing to do with the dentist, if only it did."

As for favourite characters, he has many to draw upon, citing Capricorn Anderson from *Schooled*, Chase Ambrose from *Restart* and Noah Youkilis from *Supergifted*.

However, he says, "Sometimes you write about a character who is just not very important and you can have so much more fun because you don't have to hang a whole book on them."

As with many authors, it seems he also has an ongoing conflicted relationship with his writing.

"I feel like your favourite book is always the one you're working on now and, of course, that's the one you hate the most, too."

The collaborative 39 Clues adventure

Gordon reveals that working on the 39 Clues series was one of the coolest experiences of his career. He wrote five instalments of the *NYT* best-selling series, including *One False Note*, weaving his unique writing style into the story. Alongside Rick Riordan, Peter Lerangis and Jude Watson, Gordon served as one of the original authors of the immensely popular adventure series.

"The camaraderie between us was interesting because we couldn't go completely off the rails with where the story was going and who the characters were. We weren't held back from using our own personalities in our writing."

The project also pushed him out of his comfort zone.

"It was an amazing exercise to start in a place where you never could have come to following your own usual creative process."

Audiences young and old?

Although there is something to be said for the enduring shelf life of a story, sometimes Gordon is surprised to find devoted 45-year-olds on his fan forum talking about Bugs Potter. From his young fans' point of view, these guys are ancient.

His most prominent fan from an earlier time is none other than Prime Minister Justin Trudeau who enjoyed the Macdonald Hall books.

"I was 17 when I met him during a visit to Rockcliffe Park Public School in Ottawa. He was kind of famous because his dad was Prime Minister. I don't know how often he thinks about Macdonald Hall these days as he has a lot on his mind."

"Egos, quiet on the set please."

Several of Gordon's books have been transformed into shows and movies for outlets including YTV and Nickelodeon. Gordon continues to be amazed at their tremendous reach.

"*Monday Night Football Club* was on TV for four seasons. When I would do a school visit, most of the kids would know about *The Jersey*. It's so widespread."

Gordon felt the production of the Bruno & Boots TV movies, based on the Macdonald Hall book series, was a confluence of old fans all coming together. Coming full circle, the producer of the series introduced himself to Gordon with a fan letter he wrote to Gordon as a kid.

"The idea that, as a producer, he wanted to come back to the books that were important to him when he was that middle-grade age is really, really special."

Incidentally, the producers, Aircraft Pictures, received nominations for both a Golden Globe Award and an Oscar this year for their animated feature, *The Breadwinner*.

Talking about star power, many famous faces brought Gordon's characters to life, including Ariana Grande, and Jennette McCurdy and Noah Munck from the *iCarly* show.

Gordon recalled, "It seemed like all of these people who my kids watched on TV, got together to act out my book *Swindle*."

As a former film major in college, Gordon is familiar with adaptations. However, he advises that when your work is transitioning to the screen, you have to be flexible.

"It's a bit surreal, I suppose. It's cool. If you're going to be too married to what you wrote, it's going to be painful."

Readers outrank the perks

"It probably sounds better than it is," stated Gordon, who works daily out of his home office in Long Island, New York. "If I went up to my Wall St. friends and told them I was interviewed by Whoopi Goldberg or we got the Kellogg's cereal cross-promotion or 39 Clues opened the NASDAQ Stock Exchange, they would think I had really arrived."

However, as with most enduring writers, his fans mean the most.

"The things that are really important are the relationship between you and your readers, or the reluctant readers who never finished a book before they read one of yours. That's the foundation of what you do when you put together a career in kids' books — and why you do it."

Although they're devoted, Gordon feels his biggest fans aren't necessarily the kids showing up in wizard suits for the big midnight book-release party.

"They're great readers, they're great fans and there are a lot of them. I'm absolutely thrilled about them."

Even Gordon Korman felt the sting

"I always knew that I was really lucky with the way I started writing. Obviously, I would meet a lot of other writers who would have a much different experience. I know a guy who actually wallpapered his office with rejection letters."

Although well-known in Canada, Gordon reveals that it was difficult to develop a strong connection to an American audience.

"It is hard to get noticed. It certainly hasn't been one rollercoaster ride of amazing success. Believe me, I'm not going into a woe is me kind of thing."

And, as with most adults, he knows a lot more now than he did then.

"I think, as a really young writer, I was incredibly impatient."

Family life

When not travelling to meet his fans, Gordon works around the schedules of his wife and three teenage kids. Being able to attend his kids' school events meant a lot to him — even the ones that weren't fun.

He loves sports, movies and just spending time with the family.

"It's not boring to live it, but it certainly sounds way better to say I'm a competitive surfer."

What happens next?

Gordon's newest books are *Supergifted* and *Restart*. *Whatshisface* will be released in the summer of 2018, and he is currently writing a sequel to *Slacker*, which he describes as "a work in progress."

That once impatient kid with the life-changing manuscript seems to have transformed into the man with a pre-destined plan, an uninhibited adventure that unveils itself book by book. 📖

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