

The Saturday Boy

JANET MENDELSON **writer**

david fleming can spend hours agonizing over the right word to convey precisely what he wants his readers to feel. But you'd never know that from his free-flowing and absorbing first novel for young readers, *The Saturday Boy*, published by Viking last year. Alternately funny and heart-wrenching, it is the story of 11-year-old Derek whose typical middle-school struggles are tougher to handle since eight months, one week, and four days ago when the US Army sent his dad back to Afghanistan to fly Apache helicopters.

With his first novel, Fleming, 42, and a native of Weston, broke into one of bookselling's hottest markets: fiction for children and young adults. It was even selected as a 2014 Notable Children's Book by the American Library Association. But he didn't set out to write for that audience or any age group in particular. "It's just the voice that comes out when I sit down to write," he says.

But maybe there's more to it. One has to admire how completely he gets inside the boy's head. It took Fleming six years to write the book. During that time, he and his wife, Kara, watched sons Aidan, 13, and Danny, 8, and the boys' friends grow through the bumpy childhood years. The writer seems to be an astute observer who also has a talent for dredging up memories of his own. With some twists and turns, the stuff that stayed with him—more autobiographical than from his kids—became Derek's life. The story is filled with the frustration of on-again/off-again friendships, classmates who goad him into trouble at school, and imaginary exploits with superheroes who make it possible to overcome the bad guys and feel safe. It's also about how much children need close family when tragedy strikes.

As an author, Fleming recognizes how self-centered children can be, how tuned out or easily diverted when adults have problems. When Derek's cool tattoo artist Aunt Josie comes to stay and take care of him and his mom, he doesn't ask many questions. And friends, well, they



COURTESY OF DAVID FLEMING AND VIKING

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can be cruel for dumb reasons. “Think about the worst thing kids could do in a situation and that’s what they’ll do,” says Fleming.

On the other hand, small gestures can become emotional safety nets. Lying in bed with model helicopters suspended overhead that his dad hung there before he left, Derek fantasizes they are flying missions together. In a special box, he keeps letters his Dad writes him while they are far apart, rereading them when he needs to hear his voice.

“The middle school years, ages nine through twelve, are fascinating to me,” says Fleming. “They have one foot in childhood, one in adulthood, and don’t yet want to grow up. They’re in a weird place in-between, not quite a child but you still identify with what you used to love and those things create a war within. In that respect, even adults can read *The Saturday Boy* and relate to it because no one has not gone through that experience.”

Fleming attended The Fessenden School and Weston High School. He received a degree in English dramatic literature and theater from Wheaton College. After living in Natick, New York, and Atlanta, he and

Kara returned to Weston where she is Assistant to the Town Manager. Weekday mornings, you can often find him writing on his laptop at the Weston Public Library.

“I’m a townie,” he says. “I tried to leave and keep coming back.” After working in a number of fields, he’s now a stay-at-home dad, which allows him to focus nearly full-time on writing. “I’ve been writing since I was little,” says Fleming, whose work includes short stories and poetry that sometimes skews towards older audiences. “It’s what I’ve always done when I should be doing something else. When I have a breakthrough paragraph, finally getting the words right where they had been bugging me, it feels like a runner’s high.”

Although largely self-trained as a writer, he has taken some pivotal classes. A correspondence course on writing for children, through the Long Ridge Writers Group in Connecticut, provided the kind of personal attention that as a writer he welcomed. *The Saturday Boy* began as a homework assignment for the course.

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COURTESY OF DAVID FLEMING

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the ending before they begin. Others write by the seat of their pants. That’s Fleming.

“One day, the image of a little boy standing in the rain just came to me. I sent in the scene or short story, whatever it was, and the instructor wrote back, ‘That’s not really a complete story. It sounds like the first chapter of something.’ So I thought, okay, why not?” Fleming fell in love with the character. The boy in the rain became Derek, whose father, unlike Fleming’s, served in the military. But he didn’t know what would happen to them until much later when he signed up for a weekend workshop on writing young adult fiction at GrubStreet, Boston’s creative writing center. He brought the first chapter of his work-in-progress to the class, which put him in the storytelling mindset. On the way into town, on day two, he rode the T.

“It had been a really bad week in Afghanistan with a lot of deaths,” he says. “I remembered being at home, watching the news, seeing pic-

tures they put on the screen of all the people who had died that week and thought to myself how horrible it would be if that’s how you found out that a loved one had died.”

His novel took flight. A host of ideas came from conversations in that workshop. He developed new characters, some modeled on his former teachers and drama coach, borrowed dialogue from conversations with his sons, and was influenced by song lyrics by Billy Bragg, among others. Fleming sent the finished manuscript to seven potential agents and heard back from just one. His long-shot at Sterling Lord, a top literary agency, immediately agreed to represent him and started sending it out to publishers. These days, that’s remarkable for an unknown author.

In fiction for young readers, Fleming explained that the age of the main character determines the audience. *The Saturday Boy* is marketed for “Mid-Grade” readers (grades nine to twelve). But he urges those trying to write in the genre not to focus on an age group in advance. “Just write your story without constraints. If you put yourself in a box, it’s tough to get out of it,” he says. If vocabulary or incidents aren’t quite right, the editor will catch them.

Despite few book appearances, mostly local, and neglecting his responsibilities on social media (he doesn’t blog or tweet) while publishers expect all but the most famous authors to promote their own books, Fleming has received email from young readers all over the country. Some say their whole class loved it. A reader in South Dakota signed her email, “From your number one fan.” For a class project, another girl created a video trailer, as if the book was going to be an honest-to-goodness movie. Fleming says, “It was good enough to make me call my agent and say, ‘Why don’t we post this online?’”

His next book is about a 13-year-old but that’s all he’ll say. When he shipped the first ten chapters to his editor at Viking, response was enthusiastic but they wanted to know where the story is going. Publishing decisions are made faster now, he was told. They can’t wait. This time they need an outline. Let’s hope structure doesn’t stifle this writer’s imagination. [WW](#)