



Author Spotlight

Allen Zadoff chats to Graham Marks

Allen Zadoff is an award-winning writer of Young Adult novels, as well as a critically acclaimed adult author; born in Boston, Massachusetts, he now lives in Los Angeles. Here he talks to Graham Marks about how he got to be a writer in the first place, spills the beans on the genesis of his latest novel, *Boy Nobody*, and reveals where he got the idea for his mysterious kid-with-no-name hero...

I think we should start with a little bit of backstory – I gather that, far from always being a writer, you actually trained in the theatre.

That's right, I was originally a theatre director, or thought I was going to become a theatre director...I went to Harvard University, the American Repertory Theatre, for graduate school, and I was a director of Chekov and Shakespeare and other classics done in a post-modern style.

So what brought about the switch to writing books?

You know, it happened very naturally...the transition happened over a period of years. I think the main thing was that I did not know I was a writer for a very long time; a director is more of an interpretive artist, and I was always working with other people's stories. At times I would adapt them, and I worked with a lot of new playwrights, but it took many years for me to come to point, I guess, where I was ready to tell my own stories.

What was the first thing you wrote?

The first thing that happened was not in books, the first thing was that I won a contest and was brought out to Warner Bros in Hollywood, ostensibly to write for television, and I thought I was going to have a career in TV and film. But that's not what happened.

Years after that I started in books with a memoir, called *Hungry*, which is the story of my weight loss – I have lost over 150 pounds [10.7 stone] in my life – and in it I tell what it was like to live in the world fat, and what it's like to live in the world thin, or at a more normal weight.

Now that might seem like a very strange segue – from writing for TV to *Boy Nobody* – but *Boy Nobody* is actually my fifth book. So here's the unusual thing...being fat in my life for a long time, and I am not shy about that word, I often felt like an outsider and I would often be in situations and look around me and feel different from everyone else; I would kind of study the world almost from an outside perspective and get that sense of a barrier: them and me. And it was false, completely false, as I would find out years later after I had lost the weight. That feeling was a part of the disorder, so to speak.

I share that with you because, as you think about *Boy Nobody*, you think about the hero: isolated, being almost like a cowboy, or some sort of hero who is cast adrift in a world that he's not a part of, but in which he has to function invisibly, like an alien...that feeling came out of a very real place for me in my life.

You have three YA novels to your credit – *Since You Left Me*, *Food, Girls and Other Things I Can't Have* and *My Life, the Theatre and Other Tragedies* – all, I think I'm right, with Jewish central characters and a lot to do with your upbringing and where you came from.

Since You Left Me deals, more specifically, with Jewish questions, being about a boy trapped in Jewish school who doesn't believe; that was not my story, particularly, but that book was about spirituality and the

conflict between contemporary life and religious life. All three books deal with different aspects of my life: *Food, Girls...* was about weight and what it was like to be an overweight teenager; *My Life...*, dealt with my love of theatre and what it was like to be a teen in the theatre. They all dealt with different aspects of who I am and who I was.

And *Boy Nobody* not so much. It's quite a switch.

Quite a departure!

Certainly is!

Yes, it's a departure, but as I say, at least from an author's perspective, there are elements of *Boy Nobody* that are very consistent with the themes in my other books: identity, self-discovery, waking up to find out who one really is versus who one thought one was. Only now it's all happening in this very exciting thriller context.

I think there's always a moment when an idea bursts into flames and it just has to be written. Do you remember what the spark was for the *Boy Nobody*?

I was in the midst of writing *My Life...*, which is a contemporary tragi-comedy, when, out of the blue, *Boy Nobody*, this character, began to speak to me. Often when I write it begins with a character talking, and he's usually upset about something and he starts to tell me his story and I begin to listen.

So, in the middle of writing this comic novel, this very serious, dark, boy-of-few-words began to speak and he was telling me right away that his job was to kill people, that he had no home, that he had no name and that he travelled from place to place, always invisible and always fitting in with those around him.

It was a complete shock to me. I say sometimes, when a character like *Boy Nobody* starts to tell you his story, you're wise to listen.

Did you know from the start what the end was going to be?

I did not know the end of the entire three-book series, but I did know the ending of Book 1, almost immediately...it is a very surprising ending, which I knew before I even started writing the book.

And were you aware, the first time you met this shadowy character, whose name changes with every mission he takes on, that it would be a three-part story?

Not immediately, but as it developed, I started to realise that there was a much bigger world here than I had ever written about before.

I don't know if you can tell me this, but will we get to actually meet Mother and Father and are we ever going to go 'home'?

[A long, thoughtful pause...]

To answer your question, as much as I can, we are going to meet Mother and Father...the origins of The Program will be revealed, ultimately, and the mystery of who *Boy Nobody* really is, and how he came to be the person he is, will be explained.

Your hero is a quintessentially sad figure: he's conflicted, amoral and talented, but above all, what came off the pages of the book for me was this loneliness, this feeling of abandonment that surrounded him. In a funny way we do, as readers, admire him, but it can be hard to like him – do you?

I like him a great deal, yeah...I like him a great deal and I empathise deeply with him. When I was a director...I don't know if this is going to come out right and we'll see if it makes the interview or not...when I was a young director a very great mentor/director said to me 'never cast any actor that you don't want to kiss' [much laughter]. And what he meant, I think, in the broadest sense, is that you have to love the people that you work with – on some level you have to love them.

As an author, I can't write about a hero unless I love him, and I really do love *Boy Nobody*; I understand what's going on inside of him, and he is very conflicted, as you say, and he also doesn't know who he is, yet. I think this is a coming-of-age story for that reason, a coming-of-age story set in a very unusual world, a thriller world of espionage and teen assassins.

There seems to be a part of the real, pre-Program *Boy Nobody* that has, against all odds, survived the process and is still alive at his core – the ‘rebellious teen’ in him, if you like – will we see more of that side of his character?

We absolutely will see it...I don't want to give away anything from Book 2, but I will say that there is a little more information about how he came to be who he is today.

Here's something that fascinates me: this idea that you have a normal boy who at some point, at a break in his life, is trained as a soldier, as an assassin...I am fascinated by the notion of a boy with this intense skill-set, looking back on his life, almost like a detective on a cold case...he's studying who he was at twelve, eleven, ten, nine years old, trying to figure out what happened, but he's using the skill-set that he has today, and it's like his early youth is a case which he has to figure out.

Your hero lives a life that any teen boy – and I think a lot of their dads – would love: the guns, the girls and the fast cars. But you never glamorise all these things, almost making them, in a way, quite ordinary – in fact there's a lot of tedium in this life. It's a very delicate balancing act you perform.

Yes, well, there is romantic aspect to the life, like you say - the guns, girls and fast cars - but there's also a very un-romantic quality to it; as we know, connections are dangerous to him, so while as a teen boy he longs to connect, especially with women, he's torn between his desire to connect and his need to stay anonymous and stay unencumbered by emotional connections to others.

That's a big problem for him...he talks at one point about not being able to have any 'taste' in things; he doesn't use one toothpaste, for example, he uses different toothpastes, because to attach to a brand or a particular way of living in the world, ultimately will cause him to be discovered. It will make him recognisable, if he develops patterns that can be followed, and his whole *raison d'être* is about staying unrecognisable.

He's fighting against his own and human nature, isn't he...we don't like random, we like patterns.

There's comfort in patterns, in going to the same coffee shop in the morning, in seeing the same people every day in school or at work that you care about, or even that you hate! You asked me before, do I like this character, do I feel close to him, and I imagine this boy trying to live without these simple, human connections that are so necessary for us to be who we are. That's why I feel so close to him, because how difficult must that be for him?

Very difficult...you can tell that he's very wired, very controlled.

Yes, and we're seeing that control slip as this series begins.

I can quite see why Hollywood has shown an interest in *Boy Nobody* – what is the state of play with that at the moment?

Sony Pictures optioned the book, Will Smith's company is producing and it's in active development. I'm not writing the screenplay.

Your hero has a very strong and illuminating internal dialogue in the book – do you think they'll be able to transfer these thoughts from the page, where the reader is included, to a character on the screen where the viewer can't hear them? In other words, is it ever possible to make a movie as good as the book it's based on?

I'm hopeful that the film will be as good as the book, or even better in its own way. The films that I love are films that capture the essence of a book and bring it into a completely different visual world, and somehow the collaboration of that visual with the literary makes something slightly different and even greater.

It's possible...

It is possible, Mr Kubrick* has done it!

*[*Stanley Kubrick, director of the movie versions of *The Sentinel* (2001: A Space Odyssey), *The Shining* and *Barry Lyndon*, among many other films]*

It's just that the book has a lot of subtleties to it, and it would be easy for a director to ignore them and simply go for the action.

Yes, I do think that it will be very important to capture the interior life of *Boy Nobody* in any film, to get the subtleties and complexities of this character who is both a teen and a soldier, a boy and an assassin.

You make some very difficult decisions, I thought, in your storytelling, specifically with one of the characters whom you kill off and one you don't; we can't go into details, but I found the choices the boy makes almost counter-intuitive, very surprising – were they hard choices for you, too?

Very hard, it was a very tough decision. I can say that the ending is shocking, both in the world of the book and in the larger literary sense as well. I think it's something you don't see very often...and here's the part that's gratifying for me – I'm hearing from a lot of teens and reviewers who are saying that the ending instantly gave the book a credibility it wouldn't have had otherwise.

I see from your website that you're no stranger to the gun range – how is your trade craft, how deep did you go in your research?

You know, most of the book is an act of imagination, on my part. I did get a shooting coach and go to the range to get some experience of firing weapons – although, interestingly, Boy Nobody never uses a gun, he's quite adamant about that. He doesn't like guns, but he's not afraid of them, he just considers them inefficient for what he does. You might even say needlessly violent. But most of the spy craft is a journey of the imagination, using real life items – like iPhones and Facebook – in an unusual way. I use the world around me as the jumping-off point for Boy Nobody's tech and spy craft.

Did you have any particular influences that helped flavour the book?

You know, they keep [describing it as] 'Bond meets Bourne', and while I love Bond, I've seen all the films, and I'm an enormous fan of the Bourne trilogy, in point of fact my inspiration did not come from them. The book was only compared to them much later, and I will say, naively, somewhat to my surprise.

I was thinking more about movies I saw as a child, particularly those of Clint Eastwood, the classic Sergio Leone westerns, like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*...they introduced me to the idea of a hero who lives by a code that does not necessarily jibe with the code of the society around him, who is often asked to do terrible things in the name of Justice and has to find a way to live with that.

Do you know where you're going to go after the *Boy Nobody* trilogy is completed?

I don't know. I'm just beginning to think about life after *Boy Nobody*, and honestly I don't know where I'm going next, but I'll be excited to find out!