

Mar 2015 - REBECCA STEAD / Just Imagine

Rebecca Stead is the author of *First Light* and the award-winning and much-fêted *When You Reach Me*; here she talks about her latest novel, *Liar & Spy*...

Once again, in *Liar & Spy*, I think you've managed to create a space between the book covers, so to speak, where the reader feels a bit like they're in an alternate universe. The ground seems to shift, and there's a sense of instability...where am I, and what is going on? Is this something you can't help doing, or do you set out do it?

I probably can't help it. I [try] for a certain kind of authenticity which, I think for me, boils down to emotional authenticity. I think that I'll just probably do whatever I have to do, until it feels like I have built up the characters and their own emotions to a point where they're interacting in a way that's genuinely interesting to me, and hopefully, moving.

That's the thing I'm doing intentionally when I'm writing, so everything else is in service to that...I'm often not thinking about setting, or if I am it's because I'm trying to use it to build the character, for the internal life of the character, usually - especially in *Liar & Spy*, which is a pretty internal story. So, what I would say about that [is] I'm not trying to achieve any other kind of effect.

Like your previous novel, *When You Reach Me*, you're also building very layered personalities, but in *this* book it's not until you reach the end that the characters become truly revealed. Do *you* know who they are from the very beginning, or were you as surprised as the reader eventually is by who you were writing about?

This [may be] a complicated answer, because I did know who Georges was, and in fact one of the reasons I wrote that book was I was interested in thinking

about using armour to get through daily life, and a difficult period. I was interested in how well that works.

I write from my own questions, a lot of the time; I generally don't write because I feel like I have a message, or some point of view I'm trying to get across. It's usually my own questions that drive me to write any kind of story or character, so, in *Liar & Spy*, I thought a lot about the way we often tell kids that it gets better; it's a really popular thing that's said. I truly believe in saying that to kids - and frankly I believe in saying it to myself and to my friends, at low moments - but I think that there's another side to it, which is that if you're constantly telling yourself that your day-to-day experience doesn't matter, it can be a *little* bit crippling. I think that it's healthy to keep in mind that life is long, and pain is not going to last forever, but at the same time, taking it to the extreme - which is what I think Georges tries to do, he tries to tell himself that none of what he's experiencing matters - that doesn't work quite as well. That was what I decided, but I decided that through the writing of the book.

In my mind [Georges] has this mental armour that he puts on and takes off, so I did know that there would be, at some point, some kind of breakthrough to a more genuine version of who he is and what he's feeling. [The character] Safer was a different story, because his change was something that happened as I was writing the book, and I did not know at the beginning that he was going to end up in a much more vulnerable state than he began.

Safer is a fascinating character, who has a condition, obviously, and I wondered whether you knew what that condition was?

I'm not trying to describe any kind of particular diagnosis. I think that he has a lot of fear, and has tailored his life, probably too much, around his fears.

Yeah, that's something kids do a lot, don't they?

I think sometimes they do. I think we *all* do, frankly. I have really good friends who will consistently avoid certain kinds of social situations because...it might boil down to fear, I don't know, but I think that it's that same problem: how straight-on should you face your problem? Or is there a problem, is Safer just as happy as anyone else? A lot of people ask me [about him], "Does he go to school eventually? He *should* go to school...". I'm not all that persuaded that he *does* go to school the next year, and I'm not sure that that is the right decision for him. Again, I'm not judging.

We don't know so much about Safer's brother, Pigeon, but certainly his sister Candy has a quite protective feeling towards him, doesn't she?

Yeah, absolutely, she loves him, and certainly protects him.

In your plots, you use a similar kind of layering technique, drip-feeding us with information, some of which, I felt, was quite misleading - I was, for example, sure the father was having an affair for a very long time...

That's interesting. I haven't heard that one before.

It seemed to me that he had this secretive thing going on, and Georges' mum was away working...

Now that you say it I really see it, yeah. We're so odd, so many adults are great at communicating to kids that there *is* some kind of secret, but without bothering to attack what's really going on - although [here] Georges is, of course, the one really hiding from it himself. I don't think his father is hiding anything from him. I think his father is accommodating him.

I thought he was just feeling protective towards him.

In a way he is, but I think he's doing it because Georges has made it clear that he can't tolerate [what's actually happening], so he's wording things carefully, and not pushing, because he feels like that's what Georges wants.

You seem to enjoy the slow reveal in the way you write, and there's a feeling I get that you like playing with us, your audience. Is that true?

I don't think I'm playing with you. I think that I build stories out of pretty small moments, and moments that are very grounded. I don't know if that means I lack the imagination or what, but I enjoy trying to build a story and characters, and hopefully a pretty interesting plot, with real, everyday moments. So, for instance, even the bullying that's going on at school with Georges, it's nothing particularly sensational. There's nothing super-dramatic going on there. There's nothing that probably 60% of kids haven't experienced at some point in their lives. At least 60%, I would say.

By the way, I'm just completely making up that statistic.

This is about the little needles, without a terrifying threat, and without a dramatic turn; and it's really a challenge sometimes to build the story that way, but that is what I seem to like to do.

Sometimes feel frustrated with myself because, when you write books, you're free to do whatever you want to do. You can make things enormously dramatic and sensational, and the kind of thing that's going to make people gasp, but this doesn't ever seem to be where my writing brain goes.

I think you paint miniatures, rather than huge, broad canvasses. Your novels like are very detailed miniatures, and you have to look deep inside them to get the full story.

I have to admit, for the first few pages of the book, I found myself assuming that the lead character, who is talking to us, describing what's going on, was female, probably because the author is. Never assume, of course, but I wondered whether Georges was always male from the outset?

Yeah. Always male. It's funny, my characters really do seem to be born one way. It's worked for me so far, and I've never changed any gender. But I did realize at some point that there was no clue in the beginning, and then I thought, "Oh well, people will realize it when it dawns on them...". I think one of the things about the way I read is, sometimes, I like recognizing that I've made an assumption that's wrong. I actually like feeling a little bit confused, like I don't know *exactly* what's happening yet, but soon I'm going to figure it out.

For me that's one of the sharpest pleasures of reading, when I feel like I'm thrust into a fictional world where I'm going to sink or swim. I like to get in there and try to figure out what's happening, and I actually get incredibly frustrated if I feel that the writer is feeding me information too neatly. I get annoyed, and I get bored, and so that's probably one reason why I don't spell things out all the time. I think I'm always thinking of the pleasure of the reader, but of course I'm thinking of the pleasure of a reader who reads the way *I* do [laughs].

That's all I'm capable of doing, so I think that probably I'm frustrating some equal number of people out there who are saying, "Gosh, why can't she just write in a straightforward way? This is incredibly annoying!" And the answer is, I guess it's to do with how I love to read and what kind of book sucks me in.

Do you ever have to convince your editor that you're doing it the right way, or does she always buy in completely?

I have an incorporate incredibly open-minded editor, which is really lovely. I have a ton of latitude. She may cut things out, saying "We don't know exactly

what's happening here!", and I'll say, "I know, but then later you'll figure it out, and that'll be fun." She'll say, "Okay, so long as you know."

I think she's trying to make sure that I see what she sees, but at the same time she is perfectly open to the way I want to do it. I'm not pretending that I don't revise, because I spend a *ridiculous* amount of time revising, often with people's feedback and their reactions, and mine, but I don't lay the path out very neatly.

You told me, when we last met, that *When You Reach Me* was inspired by a newspaper story, and I wondered whether there was any particular incident or inspiration behind *Liar & Spy*?

There is no story like that for *Liar & Spy*. It comes much more from my memory of my own middle school experience, which was not traumatic. I don't think of myself as someone who survived a very terrible time in school, or who was painfully bullied, but when I think about middle school, it's amazing to me how coloured my experience was by really just a tiny bit of persistent verbal needling, or whatever you want to call it. Meaner than teasing, sort of an unfriendly tap, tap, tap of nastiness, which had to do with the way I looked, or, when I had one best friend, some of it was questioning whether we were gay, because we spent all our time together. I was not deeply upset by this at the time - I was very irritated, but I was not upset - but at the same time, when I think back to that period of my life, it is the main thing that I remember.

And so I began to think about the power of that kind of...[pause]...bullying, I guess I would say, for lack of a better word, but again this wasn't the sensational kind. It was the small, relentless kind.

Low grade intimidation.

Yeah, low grade, but still incredibly powerful. I originally wrote the book with a lot more of that kind of language - oh, and additionally I would say that when my own children, and my older son in particular, hit middle school I was surprised by how *little* things had changed. He told me some of the things that were happening in his grade, and that made me think, "Wow, aren't we more enlightened now than we were 30 years ago?" I hope we are, but from just comparing his anecdotes to mine, it didn't seem like things had changed enough.

I used a lot of the language of bullying in my first draft, and then I tried to rethink it, as a lot of it was about sexuality, and I decided to take that out - an optimistic move, but I talked to a number of people and really, really thought hard about what it would mean to include that kind of labeling and language that is so fraught. Because it's not an insult to call someone gay if they identify as gay, but it's the whole atmosphere in which words are used, and there's so much confusion around those words.

There are things called Ally Weeks where people swear that they're not going to use hurtful language that identifies people's sexual orientations; for *one* week they promise that they won't. When I learned about this I was shocked - you have to *sign* something saying for one week you are going to avoid this kind of language, used in a derogatory way?

I thought through all this for quite a while and decided to take it out because I'm hopeful that things are *actually* changing now in a way I would have hoped they would have changed already, frankly; but it does seem to me that there have now been some meaningful changes in our culture that will discourage that kind of language in middle school.

I [also] didn't want to send a mixed message to young kids suggesting that, because in my book someone is calling someone [else] gay, in order to hurt his feelings, that that isn't a derogatory way to talk. Does that make any sense to you?

Yes, it does, but I think that the fact Georges has got this slightly odd name means he'll get trouble; kids will always pick on anything different.

They'll pick on anything.

Georges name set him apart, and gave them a weapon which they used to prod him with; if you'd added or anything else, it would have been too much. You have enough there.

Yeah. Frankly, I found the book really confusing to write...very hard to write in a lot of ways, because as a writer you always want to reflect the world as you think it really is. I try very hard not to present a version of the world that has what I call 'rounded edges'; in books, we think we need to present a more sheltered or sweeter version of what [readers] know life to be, which is not that helpful, because it's more satisfying to have the truth of your life acknowledged.

I try hard, in addition to building emotional truth, as they call it, not to pretend in my books that kids' lives are a lot simpler than they are, or don't contain any darkness; I think that's pretending, and it's a form of condescension.

For me, *Liar & Spy* was a book about friendship, and the many ways that that can be defined; I wondered whether, when you'd completed writing the book, if you felt any differently about friendship. Had you learned anything?

Hmmm...that's an interesting question [pause] I don't know what I would say I've learned. I do think that it can be incredibly difficult to make yourself vulnerable in a friendship, and also incredibly rewarding. For me, that's what the story's about. It's about two kids who *finally* stop playing games and take

the risk, saying to one another, “I am vulnerable, and these are the things that scare me, and I do need people to like me, and I do need friends, and this is who I am.” I don’t know if I would say that I *learned* that while writing the book, but I would say while writing the book I learned that that was what this book was about.

Georges has got these two parallel friendships. There’s Safer, and Bob English, the kid who draws pictures - I thought Bob was a lovely character, and another type of friend.

Yeah. I love Bob English because he’s the most straightforward character, really. He’s the one who tells us the way he sees it from the beginning to the end...he never seems to be paying attention and yet notices everything and processes everything, and actually cares, a little bit. I think that we see the beginning of that friendship with Georges, and my hope is that it feels like the beginning of a beautiful relationship, but it hasn’t traveled its arc yet, you know what I mean? It’s more like the beginning of their friendship, and with Safer he’s in a deeper place.

Your dialogue is very accurate, but when we hear the thought processes that the characters are having, you are so spot on with kids of that age. Are you an ‘ear adept’, to paraphrase debut novel, *First Light*?

[Laughs] I don’t know! I love dialogue, and I try to work at it so it feels real...I wish I was better at dialogue, to tell you the truth.

***First Light* is finally being published in the UK. You will have a book out that you started writing 13 years ago, appearing somewhere as a new title, and I wonder if you still liked it, or is there anything, given the chance, that you’d change?**

What would I change in *First Light*? I'm sure there are things that I would change, but I can't put my finger on them right now. Nothing story-wise. I don't know if there's any big plot changes that I would make, but, the truth is, it doesn't matter when you re-read a book, you always see things you wish weren't there, and I'm sure that that's true in *First Light*.

It's a book which takes place largely in an imagined world which is buried within the Greenland ice cap, and it's told from two points of view; it was a *heck* of a lot to bite off as a first book, and at the time, I didn't realize that, so I have a feeling that if I really sat down with it I would have the urge to mark it up. But I have a special place in my heart for that book because I think that that book is really a product of my childhood reading. It comes from my reading during childhood and in adulthood, because I think that writers write from, mostly, their reading experiences, and that's definitely what keeps me going as a writer.

That book, *First Light*, is really inspired much more directly by the kinds of books I loved as a kid. I loved science fiction, and I loved fantasy and I liked contemporary books too...I read a lot of different kinds of books, I loved the James Herriot books about the vet, but [there was] this certain kind of book - the science fiction and fantasy stories - which I got so much pleasure from when I was a kid, that it doesn't surprise me that the first book I wrote for children was a book like that.

I hope that it stands, however many years later, as a 'thank you', or an homage, or something, to Ray Bradbury and Robert Heinlein, and to all the people that I would say thank you to if I could.

When I started reading *First Light*, I was struck by a thought that, in all your books, there seems to be something unique and slightly eccentric about where your characters live. It was the description of Peter's apartment, which made me remember where Miranda lived - and Georges' bedroom in

his first home - and I wondered if that's a reflection of your own life, or a wish-fulfillment on your part?

I think that it is a reflection of my life. Miranda's apartment is the apartment that I grew up in, with my mother, and so there's no doubt there; down to all of the details, that's the apartment where my mother in fact still lives. I can visit in anytime I want. Although, she renovated the bathroom, so the floor tile is different now. There's that thing Miranda does, where she sees patterns in the bathroom floor, and I can no longer do that.

Actually, Peter's loft, in *First Light*, is actually based on a loft that I had as a kid - not in [my mother's] apartment, but with my dad. I lived half the time growing up with my father, and half the time with my mother. In one of my father's apartments he built a loft in a room, which was my loft, and then he built stairs in the closet going up to the loft, which was amazing to me as a kid, and I loved it. I definitely had to get that into the first book right away. So these are, I guess, personal places.

Yeah, I think about space a lot. That's probably just a product of being a New Yorker. We're all obsessed with apartments. We dream of finding an extra bedroom behind the closet. I've had all those dreams.

You've talked about the mix of things in *First Light* - adventure, myths and science fiction - and in *When You Reach Me*, which has an almost documentary feel of growing up in '70s New York, there's time travel, and you bring in Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* as well. *Liar & Spy*, to me, along with elements of a John Hughes school movie, has a spy mystery thing going on there.

For me the common threads are the quirky relationships that weave through your stories. Are you picking and choosing the things you like and putting them together in your books?

Yeah, I do. I collect information for a long time before I write, and then I write for a long time, then I revise for a long time, which why I only have a few books done. I think that some material attracts other material, and the best kind of idea that you can have, when you're writing, is the kind that sticks to other ideas well, or can lay alongside in an interesting way.

I do think about that a lot in my writing, about what would be interesting next to another idea, or what kind of idea can echo something in the story, or what could work as a metaphor. Like the whole Seurat metaphor of *Liar & Spy*. That came along halfway through the writing of it, when I thought "Oh, that's interesting, who would describe life that way?" And the answer is Georges' parents. It's not really about him, it's his parents, and that helped me to see what his family was like, and who his parents were as individuals, and then that also led to his name. I had a lot of the story without any of that, [but] it got layered in eventually.

It was the same with using the game show in *When You Reach Me*. I knew that I wanted to have a present tense storyline, because the book jumps back and forth; Miranda tells [this story] from the day her Mom finds out she's going to get on the game show and it ends, more or less, when her Mom is actually *on* the show. I wanted have a thread that would tell the reader they were in the present, because Miranda and her Mom were practicing for the game show. It worked for me as a metaphor because, in a way, that book is all about categories, and how Miranda sees people in their little pigeon-holes...she *thinks* she knows about them, but she doesn't really know, so by the end of the story a lot of her assumptions have changed.

The game show is an echo of the story, in a way, in that it's all about categories, too, and then that led me to the chapter headings, which are mostly like the way the categories are named on TV show - which also informs Miranda's thinking because she's also thinking in categories. That's the kind of fun you have when you're writing a book, right? Coming up with these things, and then seeing how well you can execute. That's sort of what I mean about material that attracts material; you're always looking for a way to deepen the

story without adding a lot of words, because too many words is not a good problem to have in a book. You have to figure out some other way to make the experience a little bit deeper, and for me that's looking for other small stories that lie alongside and hopefully resonate. Together they create something which is more than the sum of its parts.

Do you put these elements into a story thinking that it's great if the reader gets what you're doing, but it doesn't matter if they don't?

Yes! [laughs] That's what I think...you know, I don't *ever* have a need for every reader to discover every thought I had while writing the book, I mean that's impossible! And sometimes readers come up with things I've *never* thought of - I had one reader say to me that I'd used the same initials for the main characters in *When You Reach Me* as in *A Wrinkle In Time*. I had no idea I'd done that...and another reader pointed out that in *First Light*, at the end, Thea's coat is too short, because that show's she's grown physically and emotionally, and I thought "Oh, yeah, that's nice!". People are always seeing things you don't see, and they *don't* see a lot of what you have put in. That's the beauty of a book.

It's something I think about a lot, too. I want a reader to participate, which is another reason I don't lay everything out so very, very clearly and neatly. Because, when things are a little messier, it gives the reader more of an opportunity to put themselves into the story and do the work of being a reader, which is to construct the most personal meaning they can get from the book.

Their own version, in a way...isn't that what you have to do when you're looking at a Seurat picture? You have to do quite a bit of work to put all the dots together.

Exactly...that is personal and ultimately rewarding. To me that's why we read.

