

A Chat With Allan Stratton

-- Where did the idea for *The Dogs* come from?

My family. My dad was very violent to my mom. When I was a baby, she took me to live on my grandparents' farm and later in the nearby town. The area was like Wolf Hollow.

-- Since you have a personal connection to the novel's themes, are there any similarities between yourself and Cameron?

Sure.

Above all, there's my overwhelming love for my Mom. She's the bravest person I've ever known. And her love for me was absolute. I think of her every day. When I'm stuck not knowing what to do, I always ask myself: "What would Mom do?"

I've also got complicated feelings about my dad. I can't forgive what he did to Mom, and I can hardly believe other things I know are true. Still, he was my dad.

Oh, and I talk to myself, pretty much non-stop. I'm not loud or anything, but my lips move. I used to try and just think the thoughts, but it was too hard. Hopefully people think I'm on Bluetooth.

-- *The Dogs* doesn't shy away from some big themes about bullying, family break-up and violence. Are these themes something you set out to explore purposely or ideas you want to impart?

I only ever think about characters and story. Themes and ideas emerge on their own from there.

I think of my readers as friends and my books as conversations between us. Each reader's experience will colour how they hear and respond to the conversation.

I think that's especially true in *The Dogs*. Some readers will think there's a Jacky ghost. Others will think that Cameron imagined him out of

his own fears and inner conflicts.

That tension is deliberate. When people ask me if there really *is* a ghost, I just smile and say, “Cameron thinks so.”

-- Do you start with character or plot?

They're inseparable. In real life, we judge people's character by what they do. In novels, what people do is the plot.

-- You started as a playwright. Why and how did you go from plays to novels?

As a playwright, I felt limited by cast size. Luckily, novelists don't have to feed their characters.

The transition was smooth. I've always pictured scene settings in detail. Once I know where I am, I pretend I'm each character and ask, if I'm this character: “What do I want? What will I do to get it?”

If we're open and honest, we can imagine ourselves into heaven or hell.

-- What was your favourite book when you were young?

When I was in Middle Grade, *Cue for Treason* by Geoffrey Trease. It's a grand adventure set at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. Mom took me to see Shakespeare from the time I was five. I was hooked. That's why, by the time I was thirteen, and from then on, I'd have to say my favourite book was *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. I know. I'm weird. Can't help it. 😊