

BAPL's Josh Berk writes 'em too

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 *Latest in a series of posts on the Arts in Bethlehem* 

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I come from a family of book-lovers and librarians, so it's no surprise that I became both. In addition to being the director of the Bethlehem Area Public Library, I've been writing books for children and young adults for over ten years now. My latest book represents a lot of firsts for me. It's the first book I've co-written – as the entire thing was written in collaboration with author and friend Sandra Mitchell. It's also the first time I wrote a book from the point of view of a female main character. Why did Sandra write the boy's point of view and I wrote the girl's? It just seemed like a challenge and a fun way to mess with expectations and challenge ourselves to leave our comfort zones as writers.

The third way that **CAMP MURDERFACE** is different than anything else I've ever written is that it's a horror novel. I mean, it's for kids, so it's not *too* scary. And as you can probably tell from the title, it's got a sense of humor about the horror. But it is a horror novel! There are hauntings and evil beings and a whole supernatural world to inhabit. I've only written realistic fiction and to be honest didn't ever think I'd write a scary book. I'm kind of a big baby when it comes to scary books or movies. I read one Stephen King book and that was it. I have enough nightmares as is just being me, thank you very much! But Sandra asked me to collaborate on this new and scary project and scary it was!

I'm not saying I became a master of the genre, but I did stretch myself to write outside my comfort level in more ways than one. I hope the scary

parts are scary, the funny parts are funny, and the kid characters relatable to anyone who is a kid (or has ever been one). There is a sequel—**CAMP MURDERFACE 2!**—coming out next year. I wanted to sub-title it “Like the First One But Worse . . .” But I was outvoted. Alas.

Thanks to the Gadfly for profiling local artists on this here blog and for allowing me to share an excerpt of Chapter One from **CAMP MURDERFACE** with you here. It’s from the point of view of twelve-year-old Corryn Quinn. The year is 1983:

Summer truly starts the minute you can no longer see your parents waving goodbye.

I wave longer than anyone else. A dark thought runs through my mind. This is the last time I’ll see them together. They’re standing there with these big lying smiles. I can see the white of their teeth from a hundred yards away. Like everything is fine—better than fine! It’s not.

It’s not fine.

We used to go to Grandpa’s farm in the summer. Back then, we’d wave and wave goodbye, long past the time the old house became a bird-sized speck on the horizon. Now I’m going to camp. And my parents think I don’t know it’s because they’re getting divorced. I wave because I have to, but I don’t miss them. I’m not going to miss them either. They don’t deserve it.

Elliot on the other hand? Elliot, I’ll miss.

The night before we left, I even gave him a kiss. It wasn’t our first, but it was the longest and saddest one we’ve shared. I felt tears pop up in my

eyes as I kissed him, and believe me, I'm not the kind of girl who cries easily.

My friend Joy from school will cry if she forgets her homework or gets a B on a spelling test. I didn't cry even when I wiped out and sprained both my wrists. Plus, I always get As on spelling tests. Consistent. C-O-N-S-I-S-T-E-N-T. Consistent.

But nine weeks away from Elliot, that's worse than a million sprained wrists. That's like spraining both my wrists and both my ankles and splitting my head open on a rock. Oh, I'm gonna miss him so much! So . . . the night before camp I bent down and leaned in and kissed him.

Right on the handlebars.

I can't believe they won't let me bring my bike to camp! Why can't you bring a bike to camp? Elliot doesn't take up much room. He can sleep in the corner! Or he can have the sleeping bag and I'll sleep in the corner!

Alas, no. I'll be out here for nine weeks without him. I hope I don't forget how to ride.

Elliot really is a beautiful bike. He's matte black and bright gold, with twenty-inch mag wheels, racing tires, and a slick silver stripe down the side. It's a BMX racing bike, just like you see Danny Stark riding in all the magazines. He's been the world BMX champion for three years running now (although his 1981 win was controversial).

All I'm saying is, if a quad reverse bunny hop over the finish line is wrong, I don't want to be right.

I literally had to beg on hands and knees for Elliot. Hands and knees. Mom and Dad were not cool at all about it. Not cool at all. It was like

they were trying to outdo each other with who could be more uncool. I'd have to say that particular contest ended in a tie. It's too dangerous, they said. Too expensive. They had a million reasons. What they really meant is that it's not for girls. They're wrong. But I finally got Elliot (note to self: Was Elliot a divorce-guilt present?) and now I have to leave him for a whole summer. He couldn't even ride all the way to camp with me.

All the kids going to Camp Sweetwater got dropped off at the rest stop parking lot. We stood around trying to look cool while we waited for the camp transport to roll in. It was wall-to-wall kids and parents and weepy goodbyes, so there was no cool . . .

*Josh is the second Berk to be the Executive Director of the Bethlehem Area Public Library; his father Jack held the post for 34 years. His mother Rita was a librarian as well, including a tenure at Moravian College. Josh is a graduate of Freedom High School and most of his teachers have forgiven him. His first book for young adults, **The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin**, was set in a high school in PA coal country and was named to several "best of" lists in 2010 including Amazon's Top Ten for Teens. His first book for younger readers, **Strike Three You're Dead**, allowed him to write about his passion for baseball. It was a finalist for the prestigious Edgar Awards presented by the Mystery Writers of America. The character of Lenny Norbeck, described as "the worst little leaguer in the history of the sport," may or may not have been based on Josh's tenure at Northwest Little League. These days he coaches his son's team, plays bass and guitar, and continues to write books for young people that blend mystery and comedy.*



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