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A F Harrold and Levi Pinfold discuss their partnership and the inner lives of their characters

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AUTHOR INTERVIEWS MAY 13, 2022 BY CHARLOTTE EYRE



A F Harrold



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Author A F Harrold and illustrator Levi Pinfold embark on another collaborative adventure with their 'creepy and captivating' novel.



AF Harrold is getting emotional talking about his new collaboration with Levi Pinfold; all three of us are talking on Zoom, Harrold (above) from the UK and Pinfold from Australia, where he now lives. “I wrote this for Levi. I wanted it to be for him. I wanted it to be part of a family of books and he was a hugely important part of the writing... If he hadn't been available it would have been an entirely separate book,” Harrold says.

The Worlds We Leave Behind, a companion novel to their earlier joint venture, *The Song from Somewhere Else*, is an extraordinary novel. Creepy and captivating, it asks big philosophical questions about life, wrapped in a “Stranger Things”-esque plot. Harrold is reluctant to say

what he thinks the story is about, preferring to leave that in the mind of the person holding the book, but my brief overview goes something like this: two boys, Hex and Tommo, are followed into the woods by a young girl, who wants to join in with their fun. When the girl falls off a rope swing and breaks her arm, the finger of blame is pointed at Hex. He runs off and comes across an old lady in a cottage who says she can rid the world of everyone who has wronged him, meaning he would be able to carry on as if nothing ever happened. The book then switches to Tommo, who wakes up the next day in a different world. He has vague memories of a different life, so why has everything changed? And why is his best friend someone new?

I sit in my shed and I have no idea and no way of knowing if anybody else is considering me in that moment

Various inspirations went into the making of the book. It was inspired, as was *The Song from Somewhere Else*, partly by things in Harrold's youth, but the big driver was the idea that we all have one way of looking at the world and we don't really know how other people experience it. "It's about the difficulty of being human, the 'condition humaine'. We live in here," he says, pointing to his own head. "It's very easy to look at people in the streets, kids especially, and forget there is an inner life there. There are thoughts and feelings deeper than anything you are ever going to find out about."

"When Levi was in Australia, doing Levi things, he had no idea about what was going on in my head... I sit in my shed and I have no idea and no way of knowing if anybody else is considering me in that moment, whether I exist in another brain anywhere, whether through the medium of books or friendship or memory."

There are also loving, unaware parents, magic and witchcraft, and Agent Jofolofski returns to help the young protagonists undo some of the decisions they made. But being a Harrold book, there are no simple answers and one character makes a noble choice that changes the very fabric of his or her reality.

Harrold told Pinfold the story in person when the illustrator was on a visit to the UK and the two men were sitting in Harrold's garden shed. "I just sat there feeling like a kid myself, having the story told to me, and at the end I said, 'Don't change a thing'," says Pinfold. He was drawn to the emotional journey the characters go on and the portrayal of a child's internal dialogue, as well as the powerful, unresolved ending. The way the story is left is not a cop-out, he says, when Harrold interjects that readers might see it that way. "It reflects the way things are unresolved in your life, doesn't it? You can get through to adulthood and still not be able to process these things that happened to you when you were a kid. Certainly when I was 12, 13, and someone said, 'It's complex, isn't it?', I

would appreciate that. When the actual text landed in my inbox I was keen to get to it as soon as possible.”

It's not just showing you the person, it's about the action and the environment

The artwork is both beguiling and frightening, with depictions of deep, dark woods and shadowy figures whose faces are mostly hidden from view until, suddenly, terrifyingly, they are right up in our field of vision. “Levi is going to be responsible for many nightmares, like Emily [Gravett] was with *The Imaginary* [an earlier collaboration by Gravett and Harrold],” jokes Harrold. “I just wrote perfectly normal words then these crazy people came along and did terrifying pictures.”



Levi Pinfold

Bloomsbury gave Pinfold free rein to choose which parts of the narrative he wanted to illustrate and the resulting book is 20 pages longer than *The Song from Somewhere Else*, despite having the same number of words. Pinfold is happy that publishers are making heavily illustrated books for this age group (11+), even though getting the visual representation right for the age range is a tightrope. He doesn't want to ruin a reader's interpretation of the text by showing too much and is instead “trying to give you that extra push, so you go into that world and are excited about turning pages... As much as I love close-up [images], quite often you see the back of people's heads or they are in the shadows. It's not just showing you the person, it's about the action and the environment.”

Harrold says he is “spoiled” by Bloomsbury, who have now published several of his books with more than just chapter-heading illustrations, and he attributes this to Gravett, who, when asked if she wanted to work on *The Imaginary*, created a whole notebook of ideas. This impressed



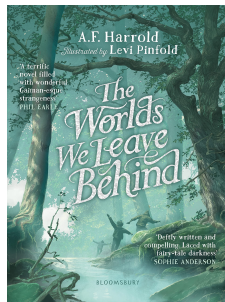
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“*The Imaginary* is the only book where I have had emails from my editor saying, ‘We’ve had a production meeting and we have put the budget up’...I earn less money, and Levi earns less, because we are splitting a royalty on this, so I keep publishing books that don’t sell hugely and I earn less than anybody else. But I don’t take Levi for granted. I’m choking up with emotion here. What did I do to deserve this?”

Metadata



Pub date: 04.08.22
Imprint: Bloomsbury Children’s Books
Format: HB
ISBN: 9781526623881
Rights: world rights
Editor: Zoe Griffiths
Agent: Tamlyn Francis at Arena Illustration (Pinfold)

A F Harrold author interviews Bloomsbury Children’s Levi Pinfold



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