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As told to Denise S. Robbins, 2485 words.

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On having faith in creative abundance

Novelist Mark Cecil discusses writing six books before his debut and focusing on optimism and good choices.

After a long career as a journalist, you left your job to write a novel about Paul Bunyan. Why Paul Bunyan for your first novel?

Actually, this was not the first novel that I wrote. It's just the first novel that I'm getting published. I've always been interested in big mythic figures. I wrote novels about Joan of Arc, George Armstrong Custer and Crazy Horse, and also tried my hand at modern retellings of Greek tragedies like Euripides's Medea and Sophocles's Oedipus Rex. This Paul Bunyan book ended up working because it was the right genre, the right time in my life, the right story. So many things have to click for an artist to break through. There's an old saying that you want to try to write the book that only you could write, that no other person on earth could have written. With my other unpublished books, I got feedback that they were strong efforts, but perhaps someone else could have written them. But the Paul Bunyan book is so unique that there really isn't anybody on earth who could have done it. It's just such a deep reflection of who I truly am.

Dare I ask, how many other books did you write?

You may dare ask. Dare I answer? Oh, my God. I would say at least six. But I write really fast. I averaged a year or two per book, while I had a full-time job.

How do you feel about the six books that may never see the light of day?

I feel good about it, honestly. I think it was all part of a necessary learning process. You learn what works. You learn what doesn't work. You learn what people respond to. There's just no better way of figuring out your craft than continuing, continuing, continuing. If I had one piece of advice, it's don't be precious. Be courageously open to the idea that you have written something that might not work. But also have faith in creative abundance—that you will have another good idea in the future. Through it all, I always had hope that one day it would truly work. I felt myself getting closer with every effort. And now, my debut novel is built on that solid experiential foundation and knowledge about my own particular strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

What would you say to the new writer who might be terrified that they have to write seven books to get published? Is there another way?

There is definitely another way. I'm an outlier. I talk to a lot of writers on my podcast so I know their track records, and I would say probably 98 percent of published authors write fewer books than me before publication. Maybe 10 or 20 percent of people are publishing the first book that they write. Fifty percent are publishing the second or third book that they write. Seven is a lot. But I have a high artistic metabolism. I just like cycling through projects.

It's important to mention, though, that I do truly love writing. It's literally my favorite thing to do in the world. If I had to pay to write, I would. I would probably pay \$50 an hour just to be able to write every day. A lot of people talk about writing like they talk about going to the gym, like it's painful. But I like it. And so that makes it easier to write a lot of books.

Where does that energy come from? Do you ever have a bad day?

While the writing is usually fun, I do have bad days in revision. When I see that my work doesn't connect to the story, or doesn't emotionally land, or feels derivative, that can be discouraging. But the writing itself is quite therapeutic. Like draining pressure from my soul.

Back to the first question: Why Paul Bunyan for this book?

For one, I love myths. And Bunyan And Henry is based on my favorite classic story: The Epic of Gilgamesh. It's a 4000-year-old tale from ancient Mesopotamia about the adventures of the king, Gilgamesh, and his friend Enkidu.

I'm also influenced by other great classics of myth and fantasy, but the thing is, so much high fantasy is about war. *The Lord of the Rings*, which casts the biggest shadow across the fantasy landscape to this day, was written by a person who was in World War I. No matter what Tolkien says, every page of that book just screams out, to me anyway, that Tolkien was working through his experiences and thoughts about war. But we don't have a huge war in this generation, and the Epic of Gilgamesh isn't a war book, so to me, it resonates more. Gilgamesh is a book about two buddies, their friendship, and the adventures they go on together. It's about love, a quest for eternal life, temptation, and loyalty. It's about all these things which I think are so much more relevant to somebody in this day and age.

Paul Bunyan is your modern-day Gilgamesh?

Yes, big time. The American Gilgamesh.

So it's not really based on the folk tale of Paul Bunyan, but of Gilgamesh transposed onto the Paul Bunyan that you created.

The Paul Bunyan myth is actually pretty thin. It's really a children's story. Paul Bunyan began as a folklore figure among lumberjacks. But then he got adopted by commerce. It's called "fake lore": advertisers were making up stories about Paul Bunyan to sell griddles or refrigerators. Then he became this Disney figure who's a hundred feet tall and eats a thousand flapjacks for breakfast. I'm not interested in that. By contrast, John Henry, who is Bunyan's companion in my novel, is maybe the closest thing this country has to a true mythic hero. The basic contours of John Henry's story are that he knew when he was a child that he would die with a hammer in his hand. And then he grew up, and did just that, heroically defeating a steam hammer, then dying of exhaustion. I think it's a story worthy of Sophocles, this struggle with a doomed fate.

Your book talks a lot about the "Twisty Path" on which these characters have to embark. How much of that was inspired by your previous career as a journalist? Did you feel like you had to take a "Twisty Path" to get to where you are?

You guessed it. That's, in many ways, exactly what this book is about. Part of the power of the fantasy genre is that it's a disguised emotional autobiography. I quit my job when I was 40 years old to write fiction full time. I had four children and my wife was working, and we were able to make ends meet. That was a major life decision, to leave a steady job and chase a dream. But it was something I just had to do. And it very much mirrors Paul Bunyan trying to follow his own path in the book to his "beautiful destiny." But the path to our dream is never a straight path. It can be humiliating, discouraging, and terrifying, just as it's exhilarating. And you never quite know if you'll get there. That may sound hokey, but hey, I lived it.

How did you maintain a creative practice while you were working full time?

I'm an early bird. I'd work from six till eight or nine, then go to my regular job.

Your kids didn't need you in the morning?

My wife and I have a system. She's a night person and I'm a morning person. After 5pm, nothing good is going to come out of my brain. She was able to take care of the kids completely in the morning, and then in the afternoons and the evenings, that's when I would take over.

Do you feel your time as a reporter helped you write fiction or gather story ideas?

Yes. I was reporting about Wall Street and finance. The character "El Boffo" in my book is a grandiose raging capitalist and is influenced by the kinds of people I met on the job. The character is over the top, for sure. But he also feels real to me. In my book, El Boffo has compiled a bestselling collection of aphorisms called "Awaken The Capitalist Within," and to be honest, I'm often nearly won over by his point of view. Like all good antagonists, El Boffo has a point.

Meanwhile, I don't think reporting helped me become a better novelist per se. If you want to write a novel, you just have to write novels. I think you have to practice the exact thing you want to be good at.

And did being a parent help as well?

In a lot of ways, this book was written with my kids in mind. I felt like I was trying to pass on something about what I think is a life well led (at least as far as I can tell here in my 40s). There are

a lot of books out there that are about people making bad choices, people making weak choices, people succumbing to their worst instincts. It's worth making art about that kind of stuff, for sure. But at the particular place I am in my life, and especially since this began as a bedtime story for them, I wanted to show them characters making strong, courageous choices.

The other thing I'll say on a practical level is that I performed this story over the course of about four to six weeks for my kids, on a nightly basis with nightly installments. Each chapter is a kind of bedtime story in its own right. That means that you can't take any chapter off. You can't have a chapter that's a palate cleanser, or an interstitial, or just one paragraph. Every chapter is six to nine pages or so. It takes five to ten minutes to read it out loud. Every night, the kids would want something that has a little action in it, a little drama that escalates, and a resolution that leads you into the next story. There's a lot of cliffhangers for that reason, to get them excited about the next night. To me, that was my own personal MFA. I had to work out my material in a way that would keep the eyes of my four children on me and keep them entertained.

Did you perform for all four children at once?

Oh, yeah.

With no chaos?

They're pretty good. My oldest son was always tired, so he usually fell asleep. But my three younger ones, look, they weren't always pleased. They would occasionally give me feedback. My daughter once gave me this brilliant piece of feedback. I told the story one night, and it didn't go well, and she was very sweet. She was maybe seven years old. She saw that I was struggling, so she came up to me and gave me a hug. I asked her, "What did I do wrong?" And she said, "Dad, every night in the story, someone either has to be fighting or falling in love." Pretty great advice.

Do they ever yell at you to keep going if there was a cliffhanger?

Oh, yes. One hundred percent yes.

Do you feel like this story was intended to teach a moral lesson to children? And how do you approach morality in fiction? Do you think literary fiction tends to shy away from having "a message?" If so, should it?

I think that there is nothing "literary," per se, about darkness. I don't think darkness in the human spirit, darkness in tone, or darkness in subject matter are inherently sophisticated. Nor do I think optimism, good choices, courageous choices, or moral people, are inherently unsophisticated. What's artistic is all in the execution, not the subject matter, in my opinion.

I love dark books and I've written dark books. But in Bunyan and Henry, I just wanted to write characters who are making the strong choice and succeeding. Am I trying to say that all human nature is rosy or that good always triumphs over evil? I'm not trying to say that, even if that is what happens in this particular book. I wanted to create the feeling like being shot out of a canon, a book of triumph and good at last prevailing after so much evil. I don't think that's preachy. It's just the kind of story this is—an adult fairy tale with a big heart. To me, it's part of a tradition that includes *Star Wars*, *Lord of The Rings*, *The Alchemist*, and even more recently, *Remarkably Bright Creatures*.

What's the most memorable children's book you've read?

I actually don't read children's books! It was always more interesting to me to just make something up myself.

Mark Cecil recommends:

Endings: The Good, The Bad and the Insanely Great. This is a film about how to craft stories that will have audiences absolutely losing their minds and screaming with joy, by two time Oscar-winning screenwriter Michael Arndt (who wrote Toy Story 3 and Little Miss Sunshine). Entertaining in its own right, it's also some of the best writing advice to be found anywhere.

The True Believer: Thoughts On The Nature of Mass Movements. An astonishing work of sociology, and one of the best books I've ever read. It explains the psychology around why human beings surrender their identities, beliefs, rationality, and even their lives to mass movements both good (Christianity) and bad (Nazi-ism). A slim gem of the book for the armchair psychologist.

Storytelling teacher K.M. Weiland. Weiland's site, Helping Writers Become Authors, is one of the best around for helping storytellers hone, analyze and develop their stories. She also has a podcast, filled with wise, gentle, encouraging advice. She's especially strong on giving advice around fantasy and myth.

The opening sequence of The Revenant on a big screen TV. Every Christmas, I go down to the basement of my in-laws, where they have a giant TV, and I watch The Revenant. I love the entire film for the beautiful nature scenes, and would submit it may be the most rapturously stunning Hollywood film ever made about the landscape of the American west. The movie is long, so if you want to get the gist, I'd just recommend the opening 25 minutes.


The folk song "Time Has Told Me" by Nick Drake. Nick Drake meant a lot to me at a very certain part of my life, when I was a heartbroken 19 year old. I recently stumbled back across his work, and it took me back to those wildly uncertain, vulnerable and romantic years. Time Has Told Me is his melancholic masterpiece.


Name
Mark Cecil

Vocation
novelist

Fact

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