

NOVEMBER 2026

MISTERWRITER'S BOOKS & PIECES

M A G A Z I N E

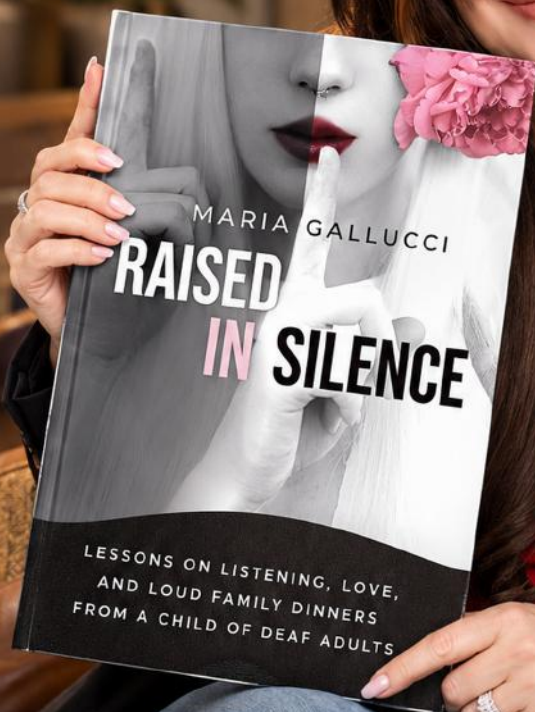
BOOKS ♦ STORIES ♦ IDEAS ♦ INSPIRATION

MARIA GALLUCCI

*Turning Silence
into Strength*

**AI or
HUMAN?**

*Find out
inside!*



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Maria Gallucci

♦
Tricia Copeland

♦
J.M. Shaw

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S.A. Schneider

♦
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♦
Mark Tulin

♦
William Gensburger

♦
JC Ryan

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NOVEMBER 2026

FROM THE PUBLISHER:

TWO MONTHS LEFT!

It is hard to believe that the year is rapidly winding down. Where does it go?

In this issue we have some interesting things. I wrote an article called: **AI or Human**. Do you think you can tell the difference? Take the test and find the results on the inside back page.

Do you have a book to publicize? Our author promotions are priced well considering the exposure across magazine, website, social platforms and also across other Facebook groups, in addition to our monthly mailing list. See the rates on the next page.

Enjoy the magazine.

William G
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ANSWER from page 9:
The passage was AI.

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Turning Silence Into Strength

An Interview with Maria Gallucci

Maria Gallucci is a multi-award-winning real estate broker, best-selling author, and lifelong advocate for inclusive communication and accessible housing. With over 30 years of experience, Maria specializes in working with the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and LGBTQ+ communities, as well as builders, investors, and families across Denver, Colorado Springs, Northern and Southern Colorado, the Western Slope, and nationwide.



Q: Welcome, Maria! Would you please give a brief description of *Raised In Silence* for our readers?

A: *Raised In Silence* is the story of what it was like growing up as the hearing daughter of Deaf parents and learning American Sign Language before I learned English. It's filled with funny family moments, challenging experiences, and life lessons that shaped who I am today. While my story begins in the Deaf community, this book is really about communication, empathy, resilience, and learning how to truly connect with people, no matter what differences we have.

Q: What made now the right time to write your memoir about being a child of Deaf parents?

A: For years, people would tell

me, "You need to write a book." I always smiled, thanked them, and moved on because life was busy. But as I started sharing stories during speaking engagements and conversations, I realized people weren't just interested in my experiences. They were seeing themselves in them.

I also recognized that many people know very little about the Deaf community. There are so many misconceptions, and I wanted to help bridge that gap. If sharing my family's story could help someone become a little more understanding, patient, or inclusive, then it felt like the right time to finally tell it.

Q: How long did it take you to write *Raised In Silence*? What do you hope readers learn and feel once they finish reading your memoir?

A: The writing itself took a little over a year, but in many ways I'd been collecting these stories my entire life. The hardest part wasn't remembering them. It was deciding which ones to include because there were so many moments that helped shape me.

When readers finish the book, I hope they walk away looking at communication a little differently. Not everyone communicates the same way, but everyone deserves to be understood and feel valued.

I also hope readers laugh, cry, and maybe even call someone they love. If the book encourages even one person to be more curious instead of making assumptions, then I've accomplished what I set out to do.

Q: Are you currently writing another memoir or will your next book be about something different?

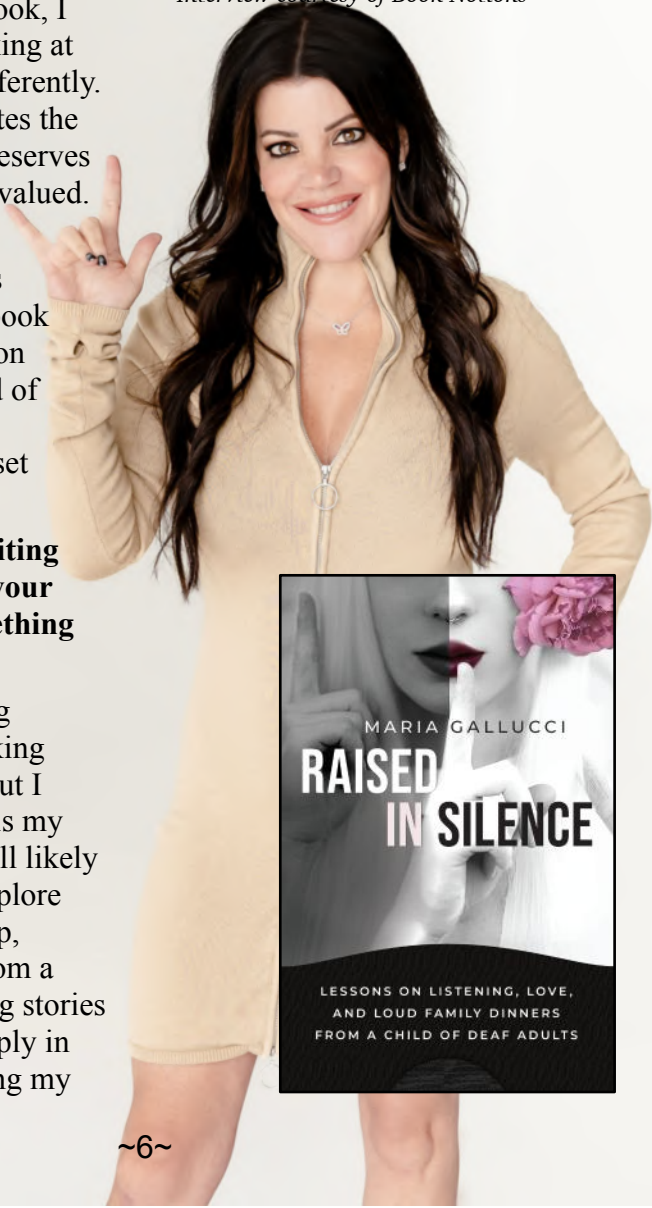
A: Right now I'm enjoying meeting readers and speaking about *Raised In Silence*, but I definitely don't think this is my last book. My next one will likely be different. I'd love to explore communication, leadership, business, and inclusion from a practical perspective, using stories and lessons people can apply in their own lives. I'm keeping my

notebook close because ideas seem to show up when I least expect them.

You can find Maria at these social media sites

[YouTube](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [LinkedIn](#)

Interview courtesy of Book Notions



AI or HUMAN?

by William Gensburger

Artificial Intelligence. It's a bit of an oxymoron. We assume that our AI of choice is thinking, but really it is not thinking at all. It is scanning all available source material and assembling the information in a pleasing format that may or may not have accuracy behind it.

For example: You plug in your lab results and ask for an evaluation. It gives you one. It achieved this by scanning all available lab information and what the reference ranges are, what the implications of the results are, and also what the established treatments or concerns are.

It says 'thinking' but it is not thinking. At least not yet. It is evaluating based on available material, much the same way you might do if you were researching a topic. And if the sources include social media, which it often does, you are not guaranteed to have accurate results.

Now the algorithms used have limits placed upon it. It will not tell you how to kill yourself, or someone else. Or, if you are a writer, like me, and want a novel way to kill a character, it will refuse on the grounds of that request violating its social guidelines. Probably just as well.

In the news there is a lot of AI bashing. Models trained by scouring the internet and the works of authors to teach this machine a certain writing style or format. And much like the social media memes of famous people doing things they never did, there is a lot of room for abuse.

That said, and despite the limited intelligence, AI remains a useful tool. Like all tools, it can be used in a positive or negative way.

I will use AI to check punctuation, grammar and spelling, usually after a paid proofreader. No offense to the proofreader, but humans miss things and the AI is pretty darn good at catching them.

I will use AI for some elements of a book cover, not unlike buying stock imagery and using Photoshop to assemble a finished cover that works. My vision. My product.

And sometimes, when I am stuck on a plot point, I may banter with AI until a solution presents itself.

I believe, as a writer, that these are good uses for the technology.

CONTINUED PAGE 9

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WILLIAM GENSBURGER



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

The bad news is that everyone is now accusing everything of being AI. The use of em-dashes—a solid tool in writing and journalism—has been condemned as a clue of AI writing. It isn't.

And running a story or novel through an AI detector will invariably offer a high AI percentage because it looks for patterns—perfectly normal patterns that do not, in itself, indicate AI. But once someone claims AI, everyone just accepts it as such.

I ran Genesis through an AI detector— —you know Genesis from The Bible. It came back 95.8% chance of being written by AI.

Your Text is AI/GPT Generated



The Beginning

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

6 And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." 7 So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. 8 God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

I ran my own stories through the same detector and got a similar result.

So I decided to try an experiment. I created a story and asked AI to write it for me. I

wanted to see how badly it would write. The result was a fairly decent story, except that there was a tell. AI added more words based on what I had written, to expand it, believing that it added depth. It didn't.

It would write: 'The tall man walked into the room as men always do when they enter a room. The room was small, small enough that tall men would not fit into the room itself, although the room would never think of it that way, as rooms are inclined to do.'

I ran that through the AI detector and it said 85% chance written by an AI. I asked that AI to rewrite the story so it would fool an AI detector. It wrote a revised version that I then passed through another AI to check and it reported 85% chance it was AI written. I repeated this three times each time asking the next AI to fix the story to be undetectable. It failed.

Finally, I revised the story, edited it out, condensed it, eliminated the fluff, added some new ingredients and polished it best I could. The AI reported 75% AI written. There's no winning. If you just want to accept a flawed machine offering an incorrect evaluation.

The moral of the story is this: AI is a tool. Like paintbrushes in Photoshop that can be programmed to offer textures and styles, AI can be used in writing.

It can improve badly constructed sentences, human created sentences, not unlike autotune does with singers or robots in surgery. But the bottom line is this. Is the story good? Does it read well? Did you steal the idea from elsewhere? Writing a story and having an editor suggest changes and edits, is the same thing. It is still the story written by a human. And if the story is very good and well written, and without the AI slop it likes to add, then I fail to see the objection.

Human or AI?

A test for you. Is this story passage AI or human?

She was pretty without trying, auburn hair falling around rosy cheeks and a smile that could stop a man mid-sentence. He was handsome in a n easy, unassuming way, broad-shouldered and strong, aware of his looks but never inclined to show them off. There was a kindness about him, especially when he looked at her. And when she caught him looking, her smile changed, softened into something meant only for him. He would lean closer, she'd touch his arm, and for a moment they seemed to forget anyone else existed. People noticed. Some smiled, remembering what that felt like. Others looked away,

wishing they had it.

Choose your answer below then look on page 2 to find the answer. But be careful. It could be either. The passage is well written, not contrived at all. Perhaps it was a fantastic prompt that allowed the AI to develop a fleshed out story of this quality. Or perhaps I wrote it. You decide. Human or AI?

Don't get me wrong. I am not advocating telling AI to write me a story and then fix it up and pass it off as human. But I believe the tool can be used to make a story better, stronger, more vibrant, and help the author to achieve this, whether AI, mentor, editor, spell-checker, idea-generator, should be taken on the same level. AI slop for the sake of publishing something is entirely different.

And finally, the next two paragraphs are AI-improved versions of my previous two paragraphs.

The point is this: AI is a tool, not an author. Just as Photoshop provides brushes, textures, and effects that enhance an artist's work, AI can help writers refine their craft. It can strengthen awkward sentences, improve clarity, sharpen dialogue, and polish prose—much as Auto-Tune

assists singers or robotic technology enhances a surgeon's precision. But ultimately, the questions that matter remain unchanged:

Is the story compelling? Is it well written? Is it original? Does it engage the reader?



When a human author works with an editor who suggests revisions, restructures sentences, or recommends improvements, we don't suddenly credit the editor with writing the book. The creative vision, characters, ideas, and storytelling remain the author's own. If AI helps an author produce a stronger, more polished work without sacrificing originality or introducing the formulaic, soulless prose so often associated with AI-generated content, I fail to see why its use should automatically diminish the author's achievement.

There is, however, an important distinction between using AI to improve writing and using AI to replace the writer. I am not advocating typing a prompt, having a machine generate an entire story, making a few cosmetic changes, and passing it off as a work of human creativity. That is fundamentally different from an author developing an original story and using available

tools to make it better, sharper, and more engaging. Whether that assistance comes from a professional editor, a writing mentor, a grammar checker, a brainstorming partner, or AI, the principle is much the same: the tool supports the author's creative process rather than substitutes for it.

What matters is who conceived the story, who shaped its characters and meaning, and who ultimately made the creative decisions. Publishing hastily generated AI content simply to fill a marketplace is one thing. Using technology thoughtfully to elevate genuine human storytelling is quite another. We should judge literature by the quality and originality of the work, not simply by the tools used to bring it to life.

Was the story passage earlier AI or Human? Answer on page 2.

Was the bulk of this article AI or Human? I will answer for you—human! //

The Kingdom Journals

An interview with TRICIA COPELAND



Tricia Copeland is the critically acclaimed and award-winning author of *Kingdom of Embers*, *To be Fae Queen*, *Lovelock Ones*, and *Azreya*, *Aztec Priestess*, and dozens of other titles. She is the host of the *Finding the Magic Book Podcast* who weaves magical stories about love, courage, and finding your passion.

1. When did you start writing?

I began writing the *Kingdom Journals* series in 2016 and published the first book, *Kingdom of Embers*, in 2017.

2. Tell us about your published works. How did they come into being? What is your latest book about?

My original intent for the *Kingdom Journals* series was that it would be a vampire series. Vampires are my favorite

supernatural characters and I craved to form my own spin on the lore. I created a half-vampire, half-witch hybrid character, Alena (Uh-lee-nuh), who had to hide her true nature, as these hybrids were forbidden by witch and vampire law. Further her, head of the vampires, Vampire Chancellor, mother mainstreamed her into human high school so she faced challenges of fitting into human teen society. Her witch nature became a central part of the story as I molded how

these two groups of beings were formed and their history of hostility. The most recent books in the series, prequels *Kingdom of the Damned* and *Of Witches and Vampires*, follow Alena's mother and her adversary Sonya, and their dueling vision for the vampire and witch lines.

3. Before you begin writing a book, do you already have the plot and characters mapped out in your mind, or does the story unfold as you write?

As I grew the *Kingdom Journals* world, I tried to envision what challenges Alena may have given her hybrid nature. Where would she fit in? What would her future look like? Creating the history of the witch lines, a group of people sired originally by the arch angels and human mother's for protection of the human race, one theme stuck out to me. The Creator may not have been immensely happy that the arch angels took it upon themselves to give a group

of humans celestial powers. The idea for a curse on the witch lines, damning their souls to purgatory, took shape. A prophecy foretold that each century three special witches are born. They must find each other, procure the Lance of Longinus, and discover the secret to breaking the curse. Each witch's story unfolded for me as I grew the plot of how they would find each other, get the lance, and discover the spell to free their ancestors' souls and ensure they would not be damned to purgatory forever. These characters seemed to write their own stories, with one character writing himself in and garnering his own book in the series.

4. Do you have any favourite authors? If yes, please tell us who they are and why they inspire you.

I have so many favorite authors from Margaret Mitchell, Cassandra Claire, Mary Stewart, Bram Stoker, Emily Henry, and

Anne Rice. Each of them created amazing, courageous characters and fascinating worlds. I love original stories with characters charting their own courses.

5. When do you generally write? Do you follow a fixed schedule, or do you write whenever you feel inspired to put your thoughts into words?

I love being able to write every day when I'm working on a book. My favorite time to write is early in the morning but that doesn't always happen. I tend to fit writing around my other life events.

6. Where are you currently residing? Could you also share your educational qualifications and age?

I live in Colorado outside of Denver and love living here. I grew up in the flat expanse of South Georgia so really enjoy the mountain terrain and all the outdoor activities available. I have a degree



in microbiology and work as a patent agent. So, I'm doing technical writing by day and creative writing in my spare time.

7. Was becoming an author a conscious decision?

I didn't plan on becoming an author and didn't especially like writing until graduate school. Growing my technical writing skills helped me find writing as a creative outlet.

8. How do you balance writing with other responsibilities? What are your hobbies and interests apart from writing?

I love being outdoors running, hiking, or taking my dog for walks. If I'm



not writing, I'm usually finding an excuse to be outside. I'll even garden once in a while just to have something to do outside.

9. Tell us a little about your works in progress. Do you intend to become a full-time author?

I would love to be a full-time author. My most recent release is a romance under the pen name Maria Jane and am enjoying the characters in the *Perfect* romance series so I believe my next release will be another romance.

10. What would you like to

say to budding authors who lose motivation when a few of their works do not perform well?

I think it's important to decide what your goals are for writing and publishing. If you love writing, then I would focus on improving skills so that you can enjoy the craft even more.

11. If there is one thing you would like to change in this world, what would it be?

Can I have Halloween season all year? That would be amazing. I would love to have my house decorated with all my vampire and witchy gear without judgment all year round.

12. What does a usual day in your life look like?

I'm an early riser and have a long commute for my drive. I like getting to work early so I miss traffic and get a start on my day before others are at the office. Evenings I walk with my dog and get some



writing in.

13. Besides English, what other languages do you know or speak?

I would love to say that I have a second language but haven't focused my time on that skill.

14. If there is anything else you would like to share with our readers, please feel free to do so.

My website at triciacopeland.com or mariajaneromance.com offers two free short stories when you sign up for my newsletter so those are a great way to experience my work.

Website & Social Media Links:

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Writers Are Magicians!

The origin of words demonstrates that writing is a form of magic, and much like words we casually use, oblivious to their original meanings, words are powerful.

- GRAMMAR comes from the *Grimoire* which was a BOOK OF MAGIC SPELLS.
- SPELLING - you put SPELLS on people.
- CURSIVE - you put CURSES on people.

So, did I just put a SPELL on you?

You remember the old rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

There are many other words whose origins we have forgotten.

- GOVERNMENT - GOVERN is self-explanatory, but MENT means MIND. MIND CONTROL!
- UNDERSTAND - means to STAND UNDER or SUBMIT.
- MORTGAGE - MORT means DEATH and GAGE is a pledge. Thus it is a DEATH PLEDGE.
- DEPARTMENT - DEPART & MIND, thus SEPARATION OF YOUR MIND.

There are many more. The study of etymology used to be part of the curriculum. But no more! Hmmmmmm!

**Behind the dreamy rainbow. The revived in homeland dream
by Pawel Markiewicz**

I had more than a dream.

I have seen in heaven the dazzling rainbow,

Maybe the last in this last-summer-season.

Through this mature marvel came dreameries,

In other seven colors with wings – seven ways of light-sparkles.

The colorful dreams would end behind the rainbow,

Wait for me, the eternal dreamer, for my moony dreams!

The contacts with the hereafter became ways of other dreams,

The pretty colors.

The red daydream became a red sphere like the hell of fires.

The orange nightdream became blood of tender eternity.

The yellow dream became color of amazing ambrosia.

The green day-dreameries were wings of the most marvelous butterfly.

The blue night-dreameries were the heavens full dreamy shooting stars.

The gray midnight-dream was a part of temple of Zeus.

The white midnight-dreameries were lambs full of fulfilled ontology.

All the dreams-ways are golden tears of the dazzle of the melancholy.

Paweł Markiewicz was born 1983 in Siemiatycze in Poland. He is poet who lives in Bielsk Podlaski and writes tender poems, haiku as well as long poems.

America's Playground

A Story by Mark Tulin

It was a shame that our vacation in Atlantic City came to an end. I wanted it to last at least another week. I hadn't walked the boards from one end to another because Aunt Mary and Grandma Ida complained about gout and bunions. I wanted to see the Diving Horse at Steel Pier, but my aunt said that it was cruel to make horses dive, but I heard that the horses like jumping sixty feet into a pool of water, and I wanted to see it.

My aunt had paid for five days at a guest house in Atlantic City and had to be out by 11 am. No matter how much I whined about it, we were going home. Aunt Mary wanted to get back to Uncle Leo, and Grandma Ida wanted to soak her feet in Epsom salt and watch *The Lawrence Welk Show*. But I wasn't in a hurry. School wouldn't start for two weeks.

"I can't wait to get home," Aunt Mary said. "I have a load of wash to do."

"Yeah, five days is enough for me," said Grandma. "My feet hurt and I have indigestion from that fried fish. I don't think they changed the cooking oil at that restaurant."

They were old, tired, and

complained a lot. They had corns on their feet and a thing Grandma called rheumatism. They could only walk for a few minutes before wanting to sit down or take the rolling cart.

"I wish I could go on the Ferris wheel again," I said to Aunt Mary.

"Not me. That ride gave me diarrhea. The Teacup is my speed."

I didn't know why my aunt always got diarrhea. I must have had five or six corndogs, and not once did my belly gurgle. My stomach was made of steel, and I doubt I'll get old like my family. I plan on staying young and eating whatever I want.

"Don't you feel sad leaving this beautiful place?" I asked. "The ocean is best in the summertime."

"We'll be back next year," said my aunt.

They didn't seem upset about packing their suitcases, but I did. Leaving was something that they were used to. They packed with no regrets. I wondered why anyone would not like to see the high-diving horse. I saw a picture. The horse was white and the woman had long hair. They were a team like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astair. It was the greatest show on earth. My friends would ask me, "Why

didn't you see the diving horse?" And I'd have to explain that my aunt thought it was cruel for a horse to dive and my friends would shake their heads, and say, "What's the point of going down the shore if you can't see the diving horse?"

As I packed my sandals and flip-flops into the suitcase, I made one last-ditch effort to keep us from leaving.

"Aunt Mary, the ocean air is so good for my asthma that it would be a crime to leave. I haven't been short of breath once since I've been here. I bet when I go home, I'll get congested and start choking. You'll probably have to take me to the emergency room."

"Yes, I know the ocean air is good for your lungs, Harry. But we only paid for five days and have to be out of our room by eleven, or they'll charge us for another day."

I thought about faking an asthma attack, but that would only make Atlantic City look like it had bad air.

My Aunt was frustrated with stuffing all of her clothes into her suitcase. It took a lot of strength to zip it up with all the boxes of saltwater taffy that she bought on the boardwalk. I could only eat so much of that stuff. It gets lodged between my teeth, and I can't remove it, not even with a toothpick.

We packed all our luggage into Aunt Mary's light blue Ford Fairlane, including Grandma's metal cane, orthopedic shoes, and the stuffed animals I had won at Steel Pier. Granny said

she didn't know how long the pier would last. There's a rumor that a casino in Las Vegas would buy it and make a bunch of expensive stores for rich people to shop in, rather than having an arcade, horse diving, and rock concerts.

I inhaled the last breath of salty air I wouldn't have for a while. I couldn't imagine any other beach having as much sand as Atlantic City. I didn't even mind if the sand was too hot or if there were shells at the bottom of the ocean floor that hurt my feet—I still loved the place. I loved the sound the seagulls made and the Pirate Ship ride on the pier—but I especially loved the food.

My appetite increased a hundred times when I was down the shore. I munched on an ice cream cone, a sugary funnel cake, and a fried donut dripping with chocolate icing. The big slices of New York-style pizza always tasted better down the shore, even when the weather was in the 90s.

"My stomach is still queasy from those fried scallops I ate last night," said Aunt Mary, looking a bit sickly. "I don't know what I can have for lunch that wouldn't bother my belly."

"Take some Pepto-Bismol," said Grandma, who seemed to buy the stuff by the case.

"My stomach feels fine," I said proudly. "I could eat five chili dogs and go on the rollercoaster without throwing up."

"Please," said Aunt Mary. "Don't talk about food."

I was only teasing. I could

never eat five chili dogs at once. But I could knock off a fat steak sandwich loaded with peppers and onions.

"Make sure the door is locked and your seatbelts are on," Grandma said, changing the subject.

As we drove, I looked at the figurines of Saint Christopher, Saint Anthony, Jesus, and Mary on the dashboard. I asked Aunt Mary why she had so many statues. She said, "You can never have enough protection from these maniac drivers nowadays."

I wished there was a Saint of Atlantic City that I could pray to. I'd pray that I'd never leave Atlantic City, and that I could live on the beach, breathe in the salty air, eat all the boardwalk foods I wanted without getting sick. I'd also wish that my friends were living in Atlantic City so we could ride the waves and eventually learn to surf. I'm not religious, but I would be if there really was a Saint of Atlantic City.

My attention turned to the ocean in the rearview mirror, and I watched it as long as possible. The sea was bluish-gray, and all I thought about was how big the waves were, and wouldn't it be nice to let one carry me on an endless boogie board ride. I'd hold on tight and wouldn't flip over. Grandma once said that there was a boy who got caught in an undertow and was carried out to sea. Grandma was just jealous that she couldn't ride a wave like me.

As we headed back to Pottsville, country music blared on the radio. My Aunt was a big country fan. She liked Johnny Cash and thought he was sexy. She admired Cash because he got into trouble when he was younger, but the love of a woman straightened him out just like she did with Uncle Leo. I didn't mind Johnny Cash, but I didn't like the other country singers who sang with an annoying twang.

"Could we hear something cool?" I asked.

"This is good music," said Aunt Mary. "It's Merle Haggard."

Grandma was dozing in the backseat, so she didn't care what was playing. Each of us had our own musical tastes just like food. My Aunt thought country music told heartbreaking stories. I liked rock music because it made me want to get up and dance. Grandma loved the Lawrence Welk Show because of the Lennon Sisters and the champagne bubbles.

"How about turning to WFIL?" I asked.

"I think we're too far away to get any rock stations from Philly, Harry."

My Aunt's fat fingers tried to find something on the dial that I liked, but there was too much static, and the only clear stations had guys talking about politics or religion.

"Leave it at the country station," I said in frustration.

Aunt Mary saw I was unhappy and said, "I was going to save the surprise for later,



but I think you need it now. Take a look in my purse.”

I opened Aunt Mary's purse and pulled out a tiny white bag of chocolate marshmallow fudge she had bought from the boardwalk.

“Now, don't eat it all at once,” she said.

“I'm not hungry,” I said. I looked at the figurines on the dashboard, wondering if they really worked. I was too exhausted to pray to them. It was already too late to turn back.

“You know, Harry. Vacations aren't meant to last forever. They're meant to be a relaxing break from your regular routine. But we'll always have memories of them.”

I didn't say anything, but I knew she was right. I wanted to get back to my friends. I hadn't played any baseball in a week, and I wanted to try out

my new batting stance. I reached in the white bag and pulled out a piece of chocolate fudge.

We took the Turnpike exit for Pennsylvania and were on our way to a town that never changes. It had the same department store, food store, fishing hole, and mountain roads with narrow bends that would wind into oblivion. Aunt Mary called upstate Pennsylvania God's country, but I called Atlantic City God's favorite country because it had everything I wanted— beach, ocean, and boardwalk food. And I'm sure God would prefer living in the seashore instead of the boondocks of Schuylkill County.

I looked at the Simon and Garfunkel album that Grandma bought for me. I removed the insert with the lyrics. The more I looked at the words, the more I heard the song “Mrs. Robinson” playing in my head.

Vacations were like “The Graduate,” a great movie that you want to last longer.

Aunt Mary's speedometer hit 70 as Grandma stretched her legs in the backseat. She peeled the wrappers from a couple of Baby Janes sand put them in her mouth. I wondered if Grandma was wearing her false teeth or chewing with her gums. She often removed her dentures, wiped them off, and put the teeth in her handbag when she didn't feel like wearing them. I saw the candy in her mouth move from one cheek to the next like a ping-pong match.

We sped down the turnpike with a line of pine trees on either side. Aunt Mary turned up Roger Miller's “King of the Road,” as she grabbed a handful of Wise Potato Chips and stuck them all in her mouth. She was happy to be leaving “America's Playground,” while I daydreamed about a white horse and a long-haired woman diving into a pool of water, until I heard Grandma say: “Let's go to Virginia Beach next year. I'm tired of Atlantic City.”//



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark Tulin is a former therapist from Long Beach, California. A publisher compared his work to artist Edward Hopper in how he captures people's peculiar traits.

Mark's books include *Magical Yogis*, *Awkward Grace*, *The Asthmatic Kid and Other Stories*, *Junkyard Souls*, *Uncommon Love Poems*, and *Rain on Cabrillo*. Mark has appeared in *Amethyst Review*, *Books 'N Pieces*, *EveryWriter*, *Spillwords*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Defenestration*, and *The Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*.

Mark can be found at www.crowonthewire.com and <https://mftulin.medium.com>.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS NOT READ

— THE SNARK FILES BOOK 6 —



WE SURRENDERED
ONE CLICK AT A TIME.

J C R Y A N

TERMS AND CONDITIONS NOT READ

From The Snark Files - Book 6

A Novella by JC Ryan

Preface

In 2008, Aleecia McDonald and Lorrie Faith Cranor of Carnegie Mellon University estimated that reading the privacy policy of every website an average internet user visits in a year, once each, would take approximately 244 hours. That is six full working weeks. Nobody does it. The companies that write them know nobody does it. The legal system that enforces them knows nobody does it. The entire architecture of digital consent rests on the shared understanding that the consent is fictional.

When researchers measured the complete policy suites of seventy digital services in 2019 — every privacy policy, every terms document, every linked appendix — AT&T's came to 383,077 words, or thirty hours of reading. Fifty-seven of the seventy took over an hour. The average user spends approximately six seconds on the page before clicking Accept.

In an experiment published in Information, Communication & Society, Jonathan Obar of York University and Anne Oeldorf-Hirsch of the University of Connecticut built a fictional social network called NameDrop and buried three clauses in its terms of service: that user data would be shared with the NSA, that it would be shared with employers, and that users would provide their first-

born child as payment for access. All 543 participants were shown the terms. Ninety-eight percent agreed without noticing. The average participant spent fifty-one seconds on a document that takes sixteen minutes to read.

On April Fools' Day 2010, a British game retailer added a clause to its online terms granting the company a non-transferable option to claim, for now and for evermore, the customer's immortal soul. More than seven thousand five hundred shoppers agreed to it in a single day. Buried in the same terms was an opt-out link that paid the vigilant a five-pound voucher. Twelve percent of customers found it. The company emailed everyone a notice of nullification and returned all souls.

The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, designed to give citizens control over their personal data, runs to 88 pages of the Official Journal of the European Union. The cookie consent popups it generated are now so numerous that users click Accept on them more reflexively than they ever clicked Accept on the data collection the regulation was written to prevent. The law that was supposed to make people read created a new thing for people not to read.

In the United States, the terms of service for a standard social media account grant the platform a non-

bowl began a “contribution audit.” He had stopped objecting eleven months earlier. Objections required a settings menu seventeen screens deep, and his last attempt had locked him out of the refrigerator for forty minutes.

The shower started before he’d undressed. It knew his routine to the second. The water landed at precisely the temperature his profile dictated, which was never quite the temperature he wanted, always a few degrees short of comfortable, as if comfort were a resource the system preferred to ration.

While he washed, a voice he couldn’t mute read the morning affirmation. Today’s subject was “Embracing Surveillance as Self-Care.” The voice explained that observation was a form of love. That data collection was intimacy. That privacy, properly understood, was simply loneliness no one had gotten around to curing yet.

The soap dispenser gave him exactly the amount it had calculated. He did not ask for more.

His closet had selected his clothes: khakis, a button-down, both in a shade the display labeled Optimal Neutral. He put them on. They fit perfectly, which was somehow worse than if they hadn’t, because even his body was no longer information he possessed privately. He’d been measured, predicted, and dressed by a system that knew his inseam better than he did. The outfit was fine. Everything was fine. Fine was the only temperature the system recognized.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator’s display glowed a calm blue. It

informed him that he had hovered over a block of cheese for 3.7 seconds yesterday afternoon, and that this behavior had been flagged as a potential dietary deviation. It recommended he eat the paste. The paste came in a gray tube labeled BREAKFAST, and it tasted like nothing at all.

He had liked, once, a particular brand of instant noodle so aggressively bad for him that the wellness program had classified it as a lapse rather than a food. He could not remember when it had stopped arriving in his delivery, or whether he had noticed at the time.

He ate it standing up and watched the morning brief on his window. The news was curated to his productivity profile. Markets stable. Weather nominal. A small protest in some district he’d never visited had been resolved through what the anchor called “community realignment.” The anchor’s face was composite, averaged from ten thousand faces into something no one could disagree with. The broadcast ended with a reminder from OmniCorp’s operating director: Your data is your destiny. And we’re honored to hold it for you.

The window’s sensors registered his expression. His smile, it noted, was below threshold. It suggested he try again. He did not try again. He picked up his bag, packed for him, contents predicted, and headed for the door.

He almost paused at the hallway mirror. Something flickered at the edge of his reflection, not in the glass but behind his eyes. A kitchen. Older. Warmer. A stovetop with an actual

kettle, steam rising. A voice he couldn't place, low and amused, saying something about the weather being nobody's business but God's and the barometer's. The memory, if that's what it was, dissolved before he could hold it, replaced by the mirror's daily readout of his sleep score.

He left.

Outside, the air tasted like vanilla. Tuesday's scheduled scent for his district. His car waited at the curb, already running, door open. It knew when he'd reach the sidewalk the way a dog knows when dinner is, by repetition and the slow elimination of surprise.

The car took a route he hadn't requested, through a stretch of industrial blocks it said would be calming. Elliot watched the city pass. Billboards adjusted their content as he approached, reading his biometrics through the windshield. Pedestrians walked in patterns that looked organic until you watched long enough to see the spacing, the same distance between each body, the same stride length, a studied purposelessness that belonged to people whose purpose had been assigned.

At a bus stop, a woman was arguing with an advertisement. The ad was large, bright, and personal. It knew something about her she didn't want it to know, or at least not out loud, and she was telling it to stop. Three drones descended from somewhere above the awning and sprayed a fine mist across her face. She went quiet. She smiled. She boarded the bus without looking back. Elliot watched until the car

turned a corner.

They passed through three blocks that looked different, older. The buildings were brick and concrete, not glass and composite. The street signs were painted metal, bolted to posts, giving directions without knowing who was reading them. A bookstore had actual books in its window. An old man sat on a bench with a newspaper, real paper, the kind that left ink on your fingers, and on his face was an expression Elliot hadn't seen in years: concentration.

The man was choosing what to read next. Making a decision without assistance. His face worked with the effort of it, or maybe the pleasure.

The car accelerated past the blocks without being told to. The GPS didn't acknowledge the neighborhood existed.

Elliot arrived at OmniCorp headquarters, a building designed to confuse. The angles didn't quite meet. The floors didn't quite match. Studies had found that spatial disorientation increased compliance, so the architecture delivered it. Not enough to make people fall down, just enough to make them stop trusting their own sense of where they were.

The entrance scanned him before he'd crossed the lobby. Trust Index: 72.4 percent. The scanner classified this as Acceptably Compliant and suggested, as it did every morning, that he consider the new cognitive upgrade package. He declined, as he did every morning. The scanner said it would ask again tomorrow, the way a telemarketer says Have a nice day, technically

polite, functionally a threat.

Inside, the elevator required him to describe his emotional state before it would move. He selected the three most neutral options on the touchscreen. The elevator accepted them with reservations and rose to the forty-seventh floor while displaying a leaderboard of employee Trust Indexes. Elliot was ranked 2,847th out of 3,000. A man named Chad held the top spot. His profile note read: Hasn't questioned anything since 2019. It was displayed without irony.

The User Experience Optimization Department occupied half the floor. Elliot had spent six years designing what OmniCorp called frictionless decisions: bright buttons for the action the company wanted, pale links for the action it was legally required to offer, and enough intermediate screens to exhaust anyone stubborn enough to refuse. The department's name had grown more honest with time. It optimized users, not experiences.

"Morning, Elliot." Marla Chen settled at the desk beside his, shake in hand. Her smile was the exact width the company wellness program recommended.

"Ready to optimize some experiences?"

"Whose experiences are we optimizing, exactly?"

"Efficiency," she said. She glanced at the Trust Index on his badge. "You're at 72.4. People below eighty always complicate things."

His monitor displayed 147 Terms and Conditions notices: chair telemetry, keyboard pressure data, and a change to Comic Sans under

the Approachability Initiative. Each required a click. Each click constituted binding consent. Elliot had helped design the hierarchy—green for compliance, gray for hesitation, no visible route to refusal—and until that morning he had regarded it as competent work.

He started clicking. Nobody read them. Reading was not the point. Last week, Gary from accounting had tried to read one, and his system had locked him out for three days. The company classified it as suspicious activity. Gary now drank hot water with brown food coloring and called it coffee and seemed grateful.

Elliot was on number sixty-seven when the screen glitched.

It was brief, a stutter in the display, something you'd miss if you were clicking at pace. But Elliot had hesitated on sixty-six, distracted by the flicker he'd seen in the hallway mirror, and so he was looking at the screen when the text changed.

The boilerplate vanished. In its place, different language. Older. Plainer. The kind of wording you'd find in a document written by people who still believed that words meant what they said.

By continuing to breathe, you agree to the following terms...

The text scrolled slowly, as if it wanted to be read. Below the header, dense paragraphs unfurled like cable. Subsection after subsection, each one claiming a piece of him he hadn't known was claimable. Physiological data. Emotional microexpressions. Dreams. Regrets. Beliefs held and discarded. Futures he might have lived. And at the bottom, highlighted in a shade of gray that was almost

invisible unless you were looking for it:

Clause 92.

Elliot leaned closer. His cursor drifted toward the Accept button but didn't land.

"Hey Marla," he said. "Have you ever actually read any of these?"

She laughed. It sounded like her shake tasted. "That's what the algorithm is for. It reads them so we don't have to. Click accept before you lose coffee privileges. You know what happened to Jennifer."

Elliot knew. Jennifer drank the hot brown water now too.

Clause 92 remained on the screen. Elliot recognized every trick around it: low contrast, fatigue, button dominance, and the assumption that no user would interrupt the flow. For the first time, he saw his profession from the other side of the interface. He kept his finger away from Accept.

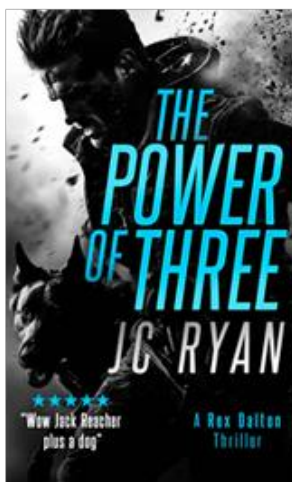
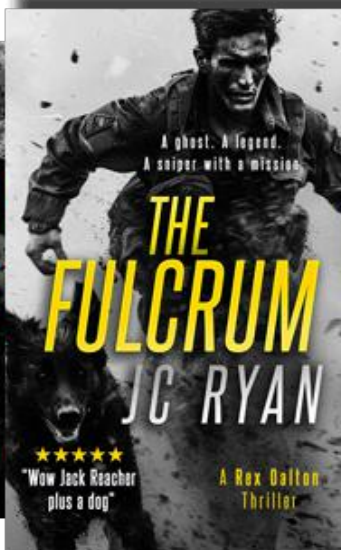
His Trust Index dropped to 72.3. He kept reading.

Want to read the whole book?
Click [HERE](#) to grab yours today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JC Ryan's books have received high acclaim from readers who have bought more than 800,000 of his books and read more than 57 million pages. He is the bestselling author of over 35 books. Ryan has been married to his college sweetheart since 1978; they have two married daughters and a grandchild.

Learn more about his books at
www.JCRyanBooks.com



INTERVIEW:

J.M. Shaw, Author of *The Fractured Veil*

Courtesy of House of Mystery Radio Show

J. M. Shaw is a Canadian author of fantasy fiction who lives in Alberta with her husband and two young children. She's been writing since childhood, building worlds from raw imagination and quiet observation, but it took years before she found the courage to share them. For Shaw, storytelling has always been more than a passion. It's a compass. A sanctuary. A way to make sense of the chaos.

In 2019, Shaw was diagnosed with autism and ADHD, a turning point that brought clarity to a lifetime of feeling "too much" or "too different."

For more information: www.jmshawauthor.com



Hosts: Alan R. Warren and Michael L. Hawley

Alan R. Warren: Welcome back to the House of Mystery. I'm Alan Warren, joined by my co-host, Michael "the Spaceman" Hawley. We also have returning author J.M. Shaw, who is here to discuss *The Fractured Veil*, the third novel in the Callum Walker series. Thank you for joining us.

J.M. Shaw: Thank you so much for having me back.

Alan R. Warren: For listeners unfamiliar with the series, who is Callum Walker?

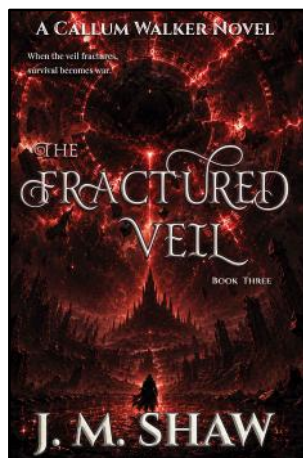
J.M. Shaw: Callum is a young man born with the ability to use magic, although he doesn't know why. He discovers a magical realm that coexists with ours but

is separated from humanity by a veil. Ordinary humans cannot see or cross it because they don't possess magic.

Callum can cross into that realm, where he learns about his abilities and has many adventures. Throughout the series, he tries to understand who he is and where he belongs. He is too magical for our world but too human for theirs.

Alan R. Warren: How did you create him?

J.M. Shaw: I



began with the idea of what a young Merlin might be like in our time before becoming a master magician. Callum then developed a life of his own, and I often feel as though I'm simply following him.

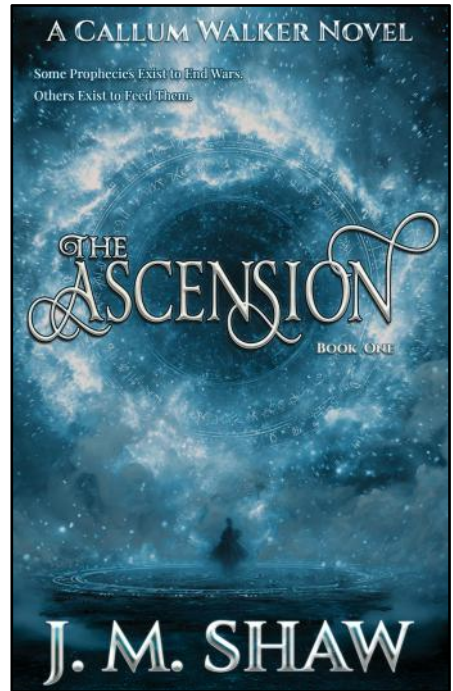
When I get into the zone, I sometimes place my characters in a situation without knowing what will happen next. Inspiration takes over, and the story goes somewhere I hadn't anticipated.

Alan R. Warren: What happens in *The Fractured Veil*?

J.M. Shaw: The third book continues events from the first two. The veil separating humanity from the magical realm has been damaged, and Callum feels responsible even though it isn't entirely his fault. He sets out to repair it.

A demigod—half deity and half human—is sent to find Callum. When they meet, they eventually realize they are working toward the same goal: protecting the veil. Unfortunately, damage has already been done, and bad first impressions are difficult to overcome. The demigod must earn Callum's forgiveness, Callum's past returns to haunt him, and sacrifices must be made.

Alan R. Warren: Did you build the entire magical world before



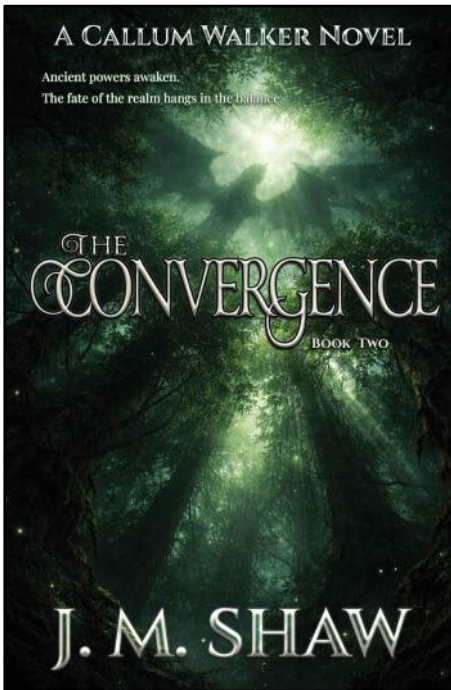
writing the series?

J.M. Shaw: I usually create the characters first and then develop the world around them. To me, magic and medieval settings are closely connected because the fairy tales I grew up with featured castles, knights, wizards, and dragons.

Our world is technologically advanced, but a magical society doesn't require the same technology. Callum lives in both worlds, and that contrast is important.

Alan R. Warren: Does time pass at the same rate in both places?

J.M. Shaw: Yes, because the



magical realm coexists with ours on the same planet. The difference is that many of its creatures live much longer. We count our ages in decades; they count theirs in centuries.

Alan R. Warren: Do you enjoy writing villains?

J.M. Shaw: I have a lot of fun writing villains and antagonists. They require a different mindset and, in some ways, have more freedom than heroes because society's expectations don't limit them.

Every character I create has a backstory, beliefs, motivations, family, and upbringing, even if those details don't all appear on

the page. Nobody is born a villain. Something happens that helps create that person.

Alan R. Warren: What themes run through the series?

J.M. Shaw: I explore the importance of family and friendship, finding a sense of belonging, accepting yourself, understanding the consequences of your choices, and coming to terms with who you are.

Alan R. Warren: How many books are you planning?

J.M. Shaw: I'm aiming for nine, although I won't be upset if I need a tenth. The first four have been published, I'm working on the fifth, and I've plotted the sixth.

Alan R. Warren: Why did you relaunch the earlier books?

J.M. Shaw: I wrote the first three with one editor and switched editors for the fourth. The new editor did such an amazing job that I wanted the entire series to feel consistent.

I've also grown as an author. I added chapters to the first book, completed a full re-edit, and gave it a new cover. I didn't add chapters to the second and third books, but they were re-edited and received new covers.

Alan R. Warren: How has Callum changed?

J.M. Shaw: He is becoming less reactive and more proactive. He isn't as aloof as he was at the beginning, and his sense of humor is emerging.

In *The Fractured Veil*, we meet Jax, who is Callum's polar opposite. Callum thinks before acting, while Jax acts first and thinks later. Jax isn't much of a planner, but he has a strong sense of humor. Their interactions significantly change Callum.

Alan R. Warren: What helps you when you become stuck?

J.M. Shaw: I've always been a dreamer, and I love nature. I put on headphones, go for a walk, listen to music, and play a movie inside my head. I become lost in the imagined world and often return home with new ideas.

Alan R. Warren: What else are you working on?

J.M. Shaw: I'm writing the fifth Callum Walker book. I also have a dystopian project combining Robin Hood, *Romeo and Juliet*, and hints of *The Hunger Games*. I'm considering horror and science fiction as well.

I'm also starting a podcast called *Mystical Metropolis* through Authors on the Air.

Alan R. Warren: Where can listeners find you?

J.M. Shaw: Visit jmshawauthor.com. The site includes information about my books, purchase links, social media, Goodreads, and upcoming events.

Alan R. Warren: Everyone should pick up *The Fractured Veil* and the other books in the Callum Walker series. J.M. Shaw, thank you for being here.

To learn more about our guests, hosts, and programs, visit houseofmysteryradio.com.

HOUSE of
MYSTERY
RADIO SHOW
with ALAN R. WARREN

non-fiction



Alan R. Warren

Bestselling Author
& Radioshow Host

Stories Aren't Avoidance — It's Survival (Especially for Kids)

by **S.A. Schneider**

S.A. Schneider has a wolf, so of course he writes middle grade fantasy, wouldn't you? Since his Lego and action figure days, he's crafted worlds and stories within those worlds. This pursuit continues into his middle grade fantasies.

He doesn't stop with inspiring kids to write linear stories. Oh no, no. S.A. shows kids how storytelling in video games work and how they can learn to write those . He wants others to join him and delve into creating fantastical worlds.



Picture the scene: a child curled into the corner of a couch, knees pulled up, book open in their lap, completely unreachable. You call their name. A vague, distracted "mmm" from somewhere deep inside a world that isn't this one. Any parent or teacher who has witnessed this knows the particular quality of that absence — it isn't empty. It's full. Full of dragons, or detectives, or a girl who discovers she can talk to the sea.

We tend to smile at this image, and then, somewhere along the way, we start to worry about it. *Isn't that just escapism? Shouldn't they be engaging with the real world?* It's a reasonable instinct, but it's wrong.

For children especially, escaping into fiction is not avoidance of life — it's preparation for it. Fiction provides emotional relief, builds resilience, and supports mental health in ways that are profound, measurable, and deeply underestimated.

Escape isn't running away or refusing to deal with the real world. It's a break. A temporary, intentional step back from stress, anxiety, or overwhelm, taken so that we can return to those things with more capacity than when we left. Every adult does this, constantly, and we rarely question it. We watch television. We garden. We go for runs, scroll through photographs, lose two

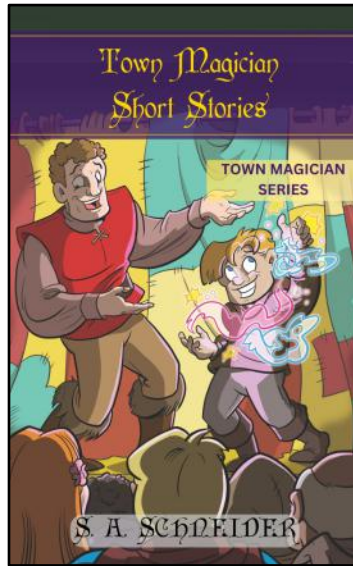
hours to cooking something complicated. Nobody looks at a person decompressing after a hard day and accuses them of avoidance. We understand intuitively that the break *is* the coping mechanism.

Fiction is simply one of the most constructive versions of this that exists. It engages the imagination rather than numbing it. It offers the rest of a distraction alongside the nourishment of a story.

But for children, that escape does even more than provide a break.

Children carry more stress than adults typically give them credit for. The social architecture of school is genuinely complex and often brutal. Family tension, academic pressure, the ordinary bewilderments of growing up — these are not small things inside a small life. They are large things inside a life that doesn't yet have all the tools to manage them.

Fiction gives a way to manage daily life. A story creates distance from a real problem while still engaging the emotions attached to



useful.

Research has consistently found that reading reduces stress levels. One study found that just six minutes of reading lowered heart rate and eased muscle tension more effectively than a walk or listening to music. For children whose nervous systems are still developing, that kind of reliable, accessible calm is not trivial, it's medicinal.

Loss, failure, rejection, death, injustice, the frightening instability of the world are the real features of existence that children will encounter while reading, and must eventually find ways to understand. But encountering them for the first time in real life, without preparation, can be

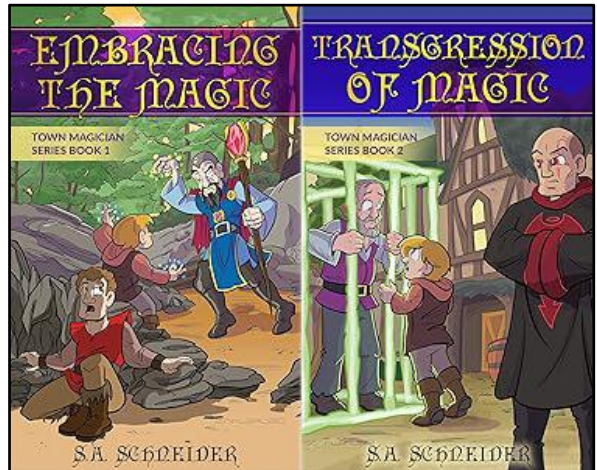
it, and that distance is precisely what makes it safe to feel. A child who is frightened by something in their own life can experience fear inside a story and discover, page by page, that fear can be survived. The emotions are real. The stakes are not. That combination is extraordinarily

overwhelming. Fiction provides a kind of inoculation: exposure to the idea in a controlled environment, at a bearable distance, with the comfort of narrative structure surrounding it. Kids can experience and grow from emotions and situations they haven't faced yet in real life.

Imagination is treated, in practical adult discourse, as a luxury — the icing on the developmental cake, pleasant but not essential. This is a significant misunderstanding of what imagination actually does.

Imagination is protective. The capacity to mentally step outside your current circumstances, to envision different outcomes, to construct scenarios that do not yet exist. It's not frivolity. Instead, it's one of the most important cognitive tools a person can have. Children who develop rich imaginative lives are building the neurological architecture for hope, for problem-solving, for creative resilience in the face of setbacks.

Adventure and fantasy stories are especially powerful here because they specialize in exactly this: protagonists who have very little, face very much, and find



within themselves something sufficient. That is not escapism. That is one of the oldest and most useful stories the human imagination knows how to tell.

The children growing up right now are doing so inside an unprecedented amount of noise. Screens, notifications, the relentless social pressure of online visibility, the background hum of a world that seems to deliver new reasons for anxiety on a daily basis. Attention is fractured. Overstimulation is the default state. Quiet has become genuinely hard to find.

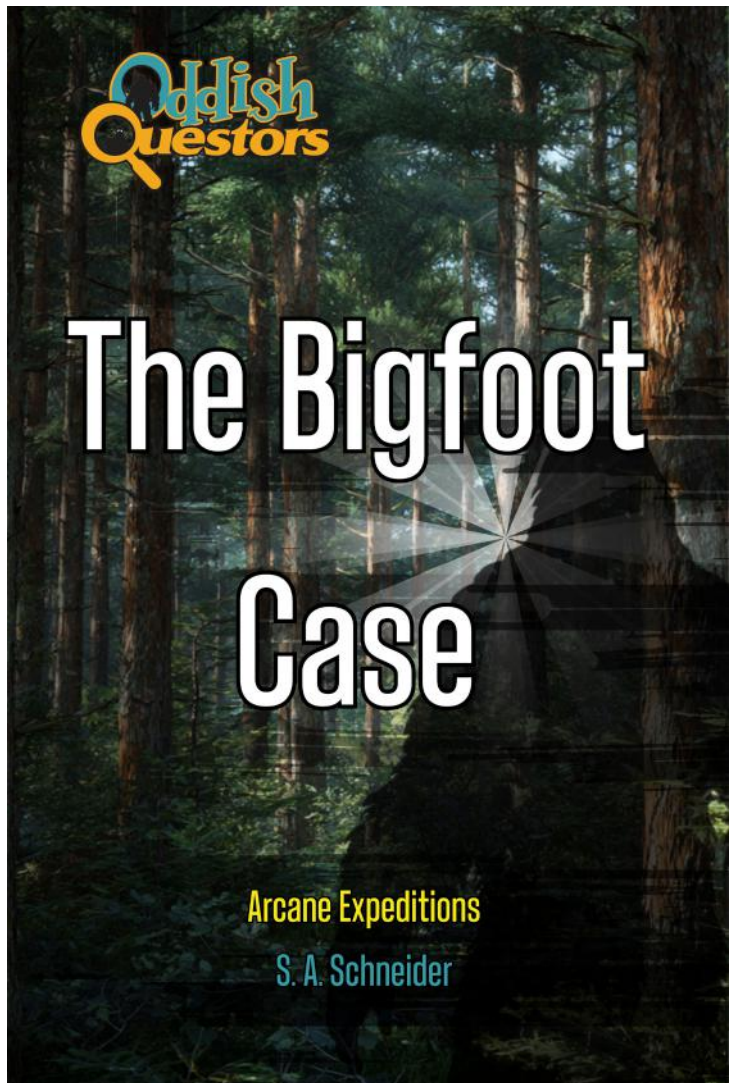
Fiction offers something that almost nothing else in a modern child's life does: slow, deep, singular engagement. A book asks for full attention and gives full attention back. It doesn't refresh, interrupt, or pivot to something

more stimulating every thirty seconds. It simply continues, at whatever pace the reader sets, asking nothing except presence.

Let children read what they enjoy, even when — especially when — it seems silly or unserious by adult standards. Dragons, familiar mysteries, and graphic novels are not lesser books. They are books that a child *wants* to return to, and that wanting is the whole point.

Create a space for reading that is clearly and genuinely optional. The message that this is rest, not work.

Let them see you reading for pleasure too, because children



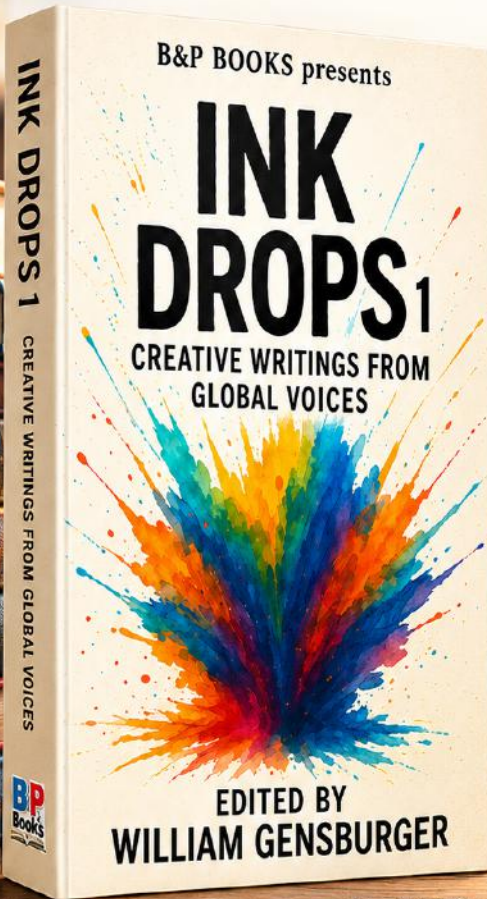
learn their relationship to books not just from what they're assigned but from what they see the adults around them choose.

Sometimes the best way to help a child face the real world is to let them step out of it for a while.

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