

Q: Where did this story start for you?

TR: When I was in the sixth grade in a small town in Iowa, my class was assigned to write a story about “Freaky Frankie,” a cartoonish, child-like version of Frankenstein’s monster. I dove into the project, and realizing most of my classmates would write about a scary monster, I went for something different. I turned Frankie into a tough guy antagonist who squared off against Brian and Max as they worked together in a secret workshop building a small plane that consisted of an engine and wings mounted on a single skateboard that the boys would also ride atop. Obviously, there was much I had to learn about airplane construction.

I’ve always found flight fascinating, though, and the idea of boys building their own airplane stayed with me. When I became more serious about writing as I neared the end of college, the first book-length manuscript I wrote was a version of *Stealing Air*. It was missing a lot of the fun elements that are present in the final novel, but Brian, Max, Alex, Frankie, Wendy, and the flyer were all there.

I always thought STEALING AIR would be my first novel. When I was sent to the war in Afghanistan with the Iowa Army National Guard, I kept writing the whole time, often writing about the characters from STEALING AIR. Because of that war experience, upon my return home, I knew I had to write WORDS IN THE DUST first. Now, I’m thrilled that STEALING AIR has been fully updated and turbo-charged, ready for its 2012 take off.

Q: So you've been working on it, in one form or another, for more than twenty years. You must know a lot about the characters.

TR: I’ve learned a lot about the value of the unpublished manuscript while working on STEALING AIR. I’ve written three other book-length pieces involving Brian, Max, Alex, Frankie, Wendy, their classmates, and other people in my fictionalized Riverside, Iowa. One of these is a time travel story in which two of Brian’s classmates travel back in time from their senior year, to right after their parents graduated high school. This story helped me understand a lot about my characters’ families and about the history of my fictional town. Another piece is a collection of short stories that all take place the summer after Brian and his friends graduate high school. There’s a story about how Wendy deals with accidentally putting a dent in her dad’s prized car, another about difficulties between STEALING AIR secondary characters Rowena and Jessica, a tale of big changes for Aaron Pineeda, and a lot more. Knowing where my characters end up helps me figure out who they are in sixth grade.

My third novel with Arthur A. Levine Books of Scholastic is set at the same time and place as STEALING AIR, but involves people in the high school. Matt Karn, the high school quarterback who gives Brian, Max, and Alex a ride in STEALING AIR, has a larger role in the next novel. B.A. Pineeda is present in both books as well. The Runaway Bridge makes another appearance. There’s even a link to my first novel, WORDS IN THE DUST.

I deliberately make these connections because, while growing up and later teaching in small towns, one thing I noticed was the incredible interconnectedness of everyone in the community. What happened to one person affected many others in some way. These ripples of effect among different people in the town are often as important and fascinating as the initial story that sets all the rest of it in motion in the first place.

Q: What sort of research did you do regarding planes and flying?

TR: I did extensive research on airplanes and how they work. I knew I didn't want the plane in *STEALING AIR* to be magical. I wanted it to be as realistic as possible. Therefore, I had to read about basic principles of flight and the horsepower on engines in low winged aircraft that are similar to the flyer in *STEALING AIR*.

I also had the chance to work on and fly in a friend's small, single engine airplane. It was then that I learned how simple basic airplanes really are. A strong enough engine and propeller, the ailerons in the wings and the horizontal stabilizer and rudder in the tail are really the most important aspects of any sky worthy plane. When my friend took me on flights, I had a much better feeling of what it must be like for Brian and Alex to soar through the skies above Riverside in their own airplane.

A third critical bit of research involved improving the design of the flyer itself. At first, my terrific editor Cheryl Klein didn't believe it could ever fly, even after I sent drawings of what it would look like. Finally, in frustration I bought several Lego kits and some miniature model skateboards. What I discovered is that my initial plan would never work and the flyer needed a completely different design. Being able to manipulate a three dimensional model of the aircraft gave me a much better understanding of how Max should ultimately build it. The model was also helpful in providing me a physical object to reference in descriptions throughout *STEALING AIR*. I even have Lego figures that look a lot like Brian, Max, Alex, and Wendy, and this is likely as close as I'll ever get to my ultimate goal of having action figures based on my characters.

Q: Which of the three boys are you most like?

TR: The easy answer is to say I'm most like Alex or Brian, cool and popular, or at least middle of the road. However, if I were to be completely honest, I'd say I have something in common with each of them.

Like Brian, I've craved flying or other adventures and I've been unsure of myself. I wasn't close to as good a skateboarder as Brian, but I used to skateboard a little and I jumped my bike off ramps the way Brian jumps his skateboard. In elementary school and junior high I, like Brian, had to make the choice between doing what was right toward one person or fitting in more with the group. I wish I could say I always made the right choice.

When I was in sixth grade, I hoped to be cool and popular like Alex, but at best, the most I had in common with him was a strong concern with my appearance and with how my peers saw me. To be honest, I was probably more like Max when I was in the sixth grade. I'm a huge fan of *Star Trek* and most science fiction like Max is. I could have used advice from a cool guy like Alex about how to tone down my sci-fi obsessions to avoid weirding people out. For example, in those days the British science fiction show *Doctor Who* was not nearly as popular as it is now after its relaunch a few years ago. Yet, I still wore my *Doctor Who* sweatshirt to school every Friday to remind everyone that the show would be on public television that night. This did not earn the show any fans or me any friends.

I guess the friendship that Brian, Max, and Alex have is sort of perfect. Alex is extremely cool and popular, focused on money and appearances, while Max is brilliant but unpopular, concerned with learning, research, and scientific discoveries, oblivious of his appearance. Brian draws them both to the middle, helping them get along while he drives them all to take the big risks toward adventure. Now that I think about it, I really hope I'm a little like all three of the boys. They form a pretty great group.

Q: Your previous novel, WORDS IN THE DUST, received a lot of attention, including its selection for Al Roker's Book Club for Kids on the Today Show and the Christopher Award. Any second-book jitters?

TR: I am honored by how well WORDS IN THE DUST was received. That novel was inspired by very personal, very emotional events that I experienced and so I'm extremely pleased that people responded to it so kindly.

I'm eager to see what people think of STEALING AIR. It's such a fun book, full of so much humor and adventure. A few fast paced exciting events occur in WORDS IN THE DUST, but it is mostly about the protagonist's inner strength and courage, about how she adapts to and feels about her changing life. STEALING AIR has heart in so far as Brian's thoughts and feelings about his place in his new town among his new friends are important to the story, but this novel has a far greater emphasis on action and adventure. There's fun on the skateboard ramps, a super fast rocket bike, and of course all three boys share the challenge of trying to get their aircraft flying through multiple original flight attempts.

The other night, I was looking through my bookshelves for a kidlit novel to read. My "to be read" pile is always quite extensive, but I couldn't find what I was in the mood for. For some reason all I could find were very serious novels. I was in the mood for an adventure that made me want to cheer out loud for the characters as they embark on daring stunts with tense action. I smiled then, realizing I was in the mood for STEALING AIR. I thought that if I were looking for such a story, maybe there are some young people who are looking for the same. That realization went a long way toward helping me combat my second book jitters.

Q: Despite the differences in their plots, what connections might you see between WORDS and STEALING AIR?

TR: Since the publication of WORDS IN THE DUST, I've often emphasized how much we Americans have in common with our Afghan allies. Zulaikha in WORDS IN THE DUST might live far away in a very different place from Brian's home in STEALING AIR, but they both basically want the same things. Brian and Zulaikha suffer the torments of cruel kids who pick on them. They want what we all want, acceptance and the chance to pursue their dreams. The difference is that while Zulaikha pursues her dream by learning to read and write, and by convincing her father to let her continue her studies, Brian chases his dream while soaring through the air with Alex on the flyer that Max designed.

Q: What do you hope readers will take away from STEALING AIR?

TR: I hope that STEALING AIR will inspire readers to dream big and to be willing to take risks in the pursuit of those dreams. I want them to understand that they are just as equipped as anyone else to do great things, even if they feel like they have no idea what they're doing. I hope they'll take the risk and fake their confidence if they have to. That's what everybody else is doing anyway.

I want readers to feel a sense of belonging as if Brian, Max, Alex, and the other characters in the book are good friends. Mostly, I hope readers like the humor, excitement, and adventure in STEALING AIR.

A CONVERSATION

Trent Reedy

Questions & Answers

Stealing Air

STEALING AIR

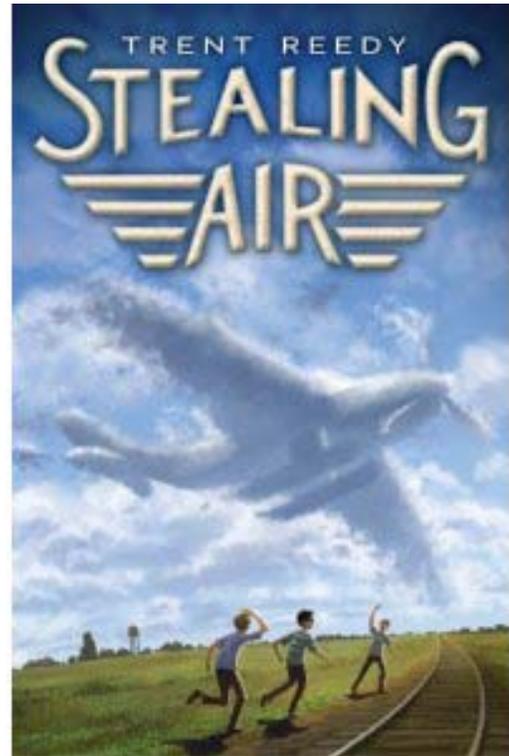
By Trent Reedy

Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic

Publication Date: September 1, 2012

ISBN: 978-0-545-3837-3; \$16.99/Ages 9-12

Also available as an eBook and Audiobook



Press Contact: Charisse Meloto

(212) 389-3785 or cmeloto@scholastic.com

This interview has been provided by Scholastic Inc.

It can be reprinted for publication either in full or excerpted as individual questions provided that they are reprinted in their entirety.