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2016 anne v. zarrow award for young readers Author Gordon Korman's career started in seventh grade

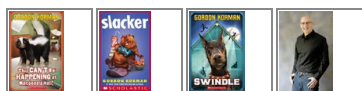
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Gordon Korman wrote his first novel, "This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall," when he was 14. A TV movie based on the second book in the Macdonald Hall series recently aired on Canadian television. Courtesy



By JAMES D. WATTS JR. World Scene Writer | 0 comments

Gordon Korman always figured that one day he would start writing books for grown-ups.

After all, Korman got his start when he was 14, and a manuscript he wrote for a school assignment ended up published as "This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall" by Scholastic Press.

"It used to be part of my overall plans, that I would write for adults," Korman said. "But now, I don't think I ever will. I love the world of kid's books to the point that I don't even find myself looking for 'adult' story ideas."

Korman, a Canadian who now makes his home on Long Island, New York, has written more than 80 books for young readers, ranging from comic escapades such as the "Macdonald Hall" series to action-adventure trilogies and the best-selling collaborative series "The 39 Clues."

His work has earned him the 2016 Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers' Literature, presented by the Tulsa Library Trust.



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Korman will be in Tulsa to receive the award — an engraved crystal book and a \$7,500 cash prize — at an event Friday at Hardesty Regional Library’s Connor’s Cove, 8316 E. 93rd St. Korman will also present awards to the winners of the library’s annual Young People’s Creative Writing Contest and will sign copies of his books.

Past winners of the prize include S.E. Hinton, Lois Lowry, Richard Peck, Louis Sachar, Madeleine L’Engle, Walter Dean Myers and Kate DiCamillo.

“Writers tend to get divided into the ‘critic pleasers’ and the ‘people pleasers,’ and I’m very much a people pleaser,” Korman said. “So it’s pretty amazing that the Tulsa Library would look at my body of work and realize that maybe it’s had a positive effect of getting young people to read. It’s very flattering to be chosen for this award.”

Korman hadn’t really planned on becoming a writer when he entered the seventh grade in his hometown of Toronto.

“My best classes were math and science, and I figured that my future would be in that direction,” he said. “Then, the school’s track-and-field coach had to teach my English class; it was his first year teaching, and he had no idea what to tell us. Basically he gave us carte blanche to work on anything we wanted for the rest of the school year.”

So Korman began making up stories about a pair of students known as Boots and Bruno, whose pranks at the boarding school Macdonald Hall escalate into increasingly slapstick shenanigans.

It took Korman about four months to complete the manuscript. When it came time to look for a publisher, he didn’t have to look too far.

“I was the class monitor for the Scholastic Book Club orders, so I copied down the address I sent the book orders to, wrapped up my manuscript and sent it along,” he said. “It had to be pretty much a fluke that an actual editor read that manuscript.”

Korman has specialized primarily in what the book trade calls “middle-grade” novels — novels aimed at readers around the 8- to 12-year-old range.

“There is something really special about the middle-grade audience because that is the time where people really discover their own opinions,” Korman said. “It’s the first time where you get to decide what you want to read, and the books from that time really speak to you.

“For example, a network in Canada recently aired a TV movie of the second book in the Macdonald Hall series,” he said. “Just about all the top people — the director, the producer, the writer — read those books when they were kids and were big fans.”

Korman has expanded his range, with books such as the action-adventure trilogies “Everest,” “Dive” and “The Island,” which pit young adventurers against such dangers as climbing the world’s tallest mountain or surviving a shipwreck, or his foray into historical fiction with a series of books about the sinking of the Titanic.

“Humor will always be my first love as a writer, but I felt I was getting a little stale,” Korman said. “So I decided to try writing a book where it was suspense and tension that turned the pages, and where you couldn’t rely on tossing out a few laugh bombs each chapter.

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"I also had to research these books, and I remember thinking, 'where has this been all my life?' because I ended up loving doing research," he said, laughing.

One thing that Korman doesn't need to research is the mindset of his typical readers.

"I believe there are just some people who are able to remember what it was like to be a kid," he said. "There are also some eighth-graders who can't remember what it was like to be a seventh-grader. My mother is one of those people who still remembers, and I suppose I sort of inherited that ability from her."

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