BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

The Patterns of Paper Monsters

A novel by

EMMA RATHBONE

A conversation with Emma Rathbone

How did Jacob emerge to you as a character?

Jacob started as a voice more than anything else. I originally imagined the novel as a series of inappropriate and very angry columns he would write for the newsletter at the juvenile detention center. It was really fun to write with so much sarcasm about the little details of the place—the food, the posters on the wall, and so on. Then I realized the column format was unrealistic and unsustainable, so I kept the nature of the voice and changed it to journal entries. That's when Jacob really opened up as a character for me, because I could talk about his past and his innermost thoughts and just basically get really personal. And that exploration, the sort of mapping of his mental topography, was one of the most rewarding aspects of writing the book.

How did you know what the day-to-day environment in a northern Virginia juvenile detention center would be like?

Well, the massive high school I went to in northern Virginia was rumored to have once been a prison (the barbed wire above the fence surrounding the football field didn't dissuade anyone from this idea). Whether or not it really was, it was of the same institutional public cartilage as all the court buildings in the area. So from that experience I already had a template in my mind of what the JDC would look like.

But I did do some research, too. I was lucky because at the time my mom was working in the court system and was able to set me up with someone who gave me a tour of an actual youth corrections facility. I got to ask a lot of questions about the routine and procedures. Not only that, but walking through the hallways and looking into the rooms solidified my ideas of how the center in my book would look and feel. And my mom passed an early version of the manuscript on to someone she knew in the system, who gave me some pointers.

What is your writing process like? Do you write every day or whenever inspiration strikes?

A lot of writers say their most productive time is the morning, and that seems to be true for me, too. My writing process involves a lot of staring at the screen and a lot of little breaks. Sometimes I write in a notebook and then type up what I've written because adding an arbitrary step makes me feel like I'm being really productive.

I do try to write every day. I don't believe in the mentality of writing only when you're inspired—partly because if I did that, I wouldn't get anything done, and partly because I've found that when I'm dizzy with some idea, the writing isn't really any better than when I'm sitting there in the sober light of morning, slowly knocking something out.

How much do you revise?

Revision is a huge part of my writing. Revision and time. I've learned that one of the most important things I can do is also one of the hardest—and that's to put something away for a while. It's almost like I need to forget a passage or a chapter and then look at it again with new eyes. And that's when I find I can see

what I really have, where the possibilities are, what needs to be cut, enhanced, and so forth. Revision isn't actually so bad. That feeling where you look at something again and finally, finally, realize where it needs to go is unbeatable.

You were born in South Africa and have lived in places as varied as Texas, New York City, and Virginia. Has that movement affected your work?

I think perhaps moving did affect my writing in that the contrast between the places I have lived has allowed me to see each of them more clearly, and therefore I could write about northern Virginia, for instance, with a sharper perspective.

What is the importance of humor to you as a writer? Did you know in the early stages of writing The Patterns of Paper Monsters *that you wanted it to have strong comic elements?*

I didn't set out to write a funny book. But I like to read things that are funny. And it's especially satisfying when that funny thing has some startling zing of truth to it. So I did try to do that. The humor is largely what kept me anchored in the book. Because writing is so hard for so many reasons, the moments when you're actually having fun (thinking of word choices or how you're going to nail a description) really help.

What do you most hope readers will take away from the experience of reading your novel?

It would mean a lot to me to have created something that people enjoyed. Also, it would be great if when reading the book people felt like I did when writing it—that Jacob had become a friend.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. How would you describe Jacob's attitude to his incarceration in the juvenile detention center at the start of the novel?

2. Describe Jacob's first series of encounters with Andrea. Why are they drawn to each other? Discuss the ways in which their relationship develops.

3. What is the importance of Jacob's recollections of Rocky, the friend with whom he used to break into houses in Texas?

4. How does the author use humor to shape your impression of such characters as Lane and Janet Stipling?

5. Describe your first impressions of David. Is he ever a sympathetic character in spite of his malevolence?

6. How do you think Jacob's relationship with his mother has shaped his view of the world? How do you think their individual outlooks change in the course of the novel?

7. Why do you think Jim Dade joins the Second Cousins program? What do you think he and Jacob learn from each other?

8. How does the novel's northern Virginia setting influence its characters?

9. What is the importance of Jacob's dialogue with Pastor Todd about individual choice?

10. Discuss the novel's ending. Where do you see Jacob in five years? In ten years?

Emma Rathbone's suggestions for further reading

These are some of the books I read as a teenager. They're the kinds of books Jacob might read, and they may have contributed to the development of his voice.

1984 by George Orwell
This is one of the first "grown-up" books that I can remember reading and being riveted by in that not-noticing-the-light-in-the-room-is-getting-dimmer-and-dimmer-until-someone-comes-in-and-switches-on-a-lamp-and-you-realize-you've-been-reading-in-the-dark-for-two-hours kind of way.

The Martian Chronicles by Ray Bradbury
I was swept away by Bradbury's vision of Mars in this book. But the thing that stayed with me the most is the book's undercurrent of sadness as men trying to colonize the planet bash in everything sacred about it.

High Weirdness by Mail by Rev. Ivan Stang
This book, written in the eighties, is a pre-Internet catalog of the outlandish things you can (or could) send away for in the mail, from New Age religious tracts to government-conspiracy zines. It's funny and sarcastic, and it expanded my knowledge of the bizarre backwaters of American culture.

The Rachel Papers by Martin Amis
It is a lot of fun to be in the pyrotechnic mind of Charles Highway on the occasion of his twentieth birthday.

The Trial by Franz Kafka
I'm sure I wasn't the only teenager who could relate to Joseph K. and his persecution by an unchecked bureaucratic body, or, in my case, high school.

Generation X by Douglas Coupland
Filled with hyperarticulate characters, this was one of the first books I encountered that described a sort of whiplash from growing up with so much information. I didn't know you were "allowed" to write so specifically about the layers of your own cultural moment.

Neuromancer by William Gibson
I was a big fan of dystopian future landscapes as a teenager, and I was astounded by the intricacy and imagination of this cyberspace epic involving a burned-out computer hacker named Case and his bad-ass girlfriend, Molly Millions.

CivilWarLand in Bad Decline by George Saunders
These stories evoke such a specific and corroded landscape and were different from anything I'd encountered. Also, George Saunders straddles the funny/sad divide better than anyone I've read.

The Sun Also Rises by Ernest Hemingway
This book made me want to go to Europe. And also live in a completely different time period. I thought Brett Ashley was really sophisticated, and I was attracted to Hemingway's lean conversational prose.