



# MUDLARK

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## Synopsis

*Mudlark* tells the story of a boy who has a natural gift for making up stories.

It is the Friday of the last full week of primary school, and Jim's teacher has to decide who will get to take home the class pet, a bird called Mudlark, for the final weekend of the year. Jim has never taken Mudlark home, and is frightened that he won't get to do so now. But he is using this fear to mask a deeper anxiety, one that he refuses to admit to himself.

Jim does get to take the bird home, but due to an unforeseeable accident, Mudlark escapes. This isn't as disastrous as Jim at first fears. It seems that Mudlark will stay nearby, and Jim will be able to catch him. The bird was kept in a cage in the classroom for a particular reason. The teacher found him being attacked by other birds. So Jim must hurry. Mudlark is probably in danger.

On his quest, Jim meets a few of his neighbours, and learns something about them. They are elderly, and have therefore suffered losses. Although Jim does not realise it until later, they understand him quite well, and sympathise with him.

Underlying Jim's quest for Mudlark is the situation at home, where his mother has just returned from hospital after a long stay.

At the end of the story, Jim is forced to reconcile the stories he has made up with the hard facts of life.

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## Writing style

Although the action in *Mudlark* is seen through Jim's eyes, I wrote it in the third person because I wanted the reader to be able to see Jim as well, from the outside. I didn't want this to be an unrealistic story. Jim is perhaps out of the ordinary, in the extent to which he makes things up, but I don't think that this character trait is all that rare.

Perhaps because of certain autobiographical elements in the story (after all, I usually write fantasy stories myself!) I found *Mudlark* a moving and difficult story to write.

I had wanted to tell the story of Jim and his family for a long time, but had never been able to get the story right in my mind. I wasn't sure how to link Jim's fantasy life with what was really going on.

At the same time, elsewhere in my notes, I had a sketch for a story about a child who gets to take home the class pet, and then loses it with catastrophic and funny consequences. It was only when I looked back at my notes that I realised that I could combine these two stories.

I wanted Jim's search for Mudlark to serve as an allegory for his fantasising (or, less romantically, lying). In chasing after Mudlark, I wanted Jim to be chasing after his dreamy childhood, his intact family, his happiness. And I wanted to write this from a sympathetic angle. Jim might be building sandcastles, only to have them knocked down by the waves, but I wanted to suggest to the reader that this is often a brave and even noble thing to do.

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### Author inspiration

In writing *Mudlark*, I was inspired by a double-edged emotion.

One side was that awful feeling everyone has experienced, some time or other, when your dreams fall short of reality. I wanted to show that bleak feeling.

But then I also wanted to show how it is that people manage to recover from this, how there can be other people, and other elements in life, that help the shattered person build up his or her world again.

The other emotion was one of sympathy. I wanted the reader to sympathise with Jim, just as those around him do.

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### Study notes

Why do people tell lies? Why does Jim tell lies? Is lying always bad?

Is Mudlark just a bird, the object of quest, or is he something else as well? (Does he stand for something?)

Did you feel that the story had a sad, or a happy end? What is the importance of the very last sentence of the book?

Jim wonders about the alone-ness of some of the people he meets. (For example: Mrs Hogan, and Clyde.) Are these people really alone? Discuss the difference between alone-ness and loneliness.

Jim's stories, and Clyde's garden, and Paulie's trumpet-playing - do they amount to similar strategies in dealing with the world?

What do you think will happen to the Liddell family, after the end of the story?

Michael Stephens



Michael was born in England, while his Australian parents were on holiday, and came to Australia when he was six weeks old. After graduating in Arts/Law from Sydney University, he lived in Italy for a year. Instead of becoming a lawyer, he wrote his first novel and has been a writer ever since. He won awards for his published short stories and two adult novels before his first novel for children, 'Titans' was shortlisted for the 1993 CBC Book of the Year Award for Younger Readers. Michael followed that with *Eddy the Great*, *Ghost Train*, *King Coker's Sword*, *A Flock of Blats* and *Moxiana*. His next book, *Blat Magic*, was published in August 2001 and won the Queensland Premier's Literary Prize for Best Children's Book.

Michael's hobby is learning Latin and Greek, which he studies at the University of New England. He lives in NSW.