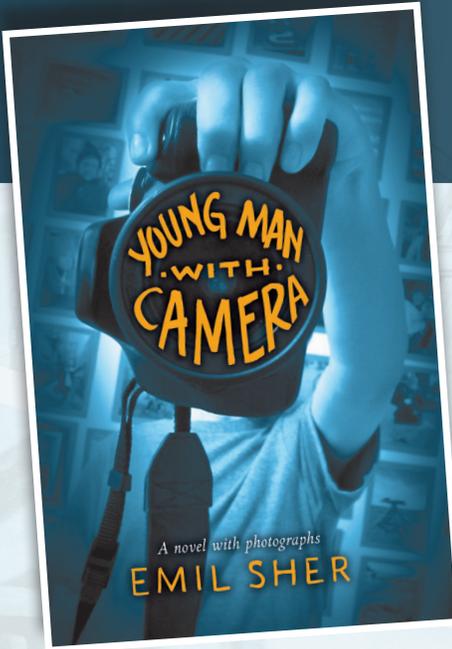


YOUNG MAN WITH CAMERA

A novel with photographs

EMIL SHER



Q & A

1

In your acknowledgments you say that ten years passed from the moment you first thought of this story until it became a book. What was that first spark?

Fittingly, the spark for *Young Man with Camera* can be found in the compelling photographs of Diane Arbus. I had long been drawn to her portraits of the marginalized in our midst, and I began to wonder about a character who lived on the periphery and might feel a connection to her work. Many adolescents feel like outsiders, of course, but many of the people captured by Arbus have physical characteristics that leave them pigeonholed: a dwarf, a giant, the young man wearing hair curlers. So I began to give thought to a character who was made to feel like he didn't belong because of his appearance. And so T— was born, bearing scars and a kinship to a photographer who asks us to face truths about others, and ourselves.

2

Photographs play an important role in this book. Which came first: a visual in your mind of a photo, written into the story, or seeing an existing photo, then creating its story?

I had the great pleasure of doing both: staging a photograph to reflect a scene in the novel, and building the story around existing photographs. In both cases we can thank the gifted David Wyman and his pocket-sized camera. Two photographs in *Young Man with Camera* illustrate how we integrated visuals into the novel. I had long imagined *Girl with Goldfish* in my

mind's eye, and pictured a young girl as she appears in the book: uncertain, tentative, not quite sure how to smile as she holds a goldfish in a front of a pet store. We learn why she is this way when we are introduced to her mean-spirited mother, who we never see but is very much a presence.



The scene featuring *Girl with Striped Face* was created in response to a photo taken years ago. It was ripe for a background story, and I couldn't resist plucking it from David's collection. Why did she paint those stripes? What did they mean? What did she want us to know without telling us?

3**Why is photography so important to T—?**

Photography appeals to T— for a few reasons, not least because his photographs deflect attention away from him — his preference, of course — and toward an image he believes reveals more than first meets the eye. And it’s this notion that what you see is not always what you get that largely explains the pull photography has on T—. In a sense, he feels like a misunderstood, What-the-heck? photograph, where at first glance we only see what is on the surface. But as T— knows, the best photographs prompt a second (and third . . .) look. Suddenly, we see things we didn’t notice the first time. Photography is so meaningful to T— because a photograph can be loaded with meaning. Too often, we miss seeing what is right before us. We only see the surface — the scars — and not what runs beneath it.

4

Gary Schmidt, Newbery Honor-winning author of *The Wednesday Wars* and *Orbiting Jupiter*, said, “*Young Man with Camera* reminds us that Art always confronts, and sometimes confounds, Darkness.” How do you strike a balance between no easy solutions and a tied-up-with-bows happy ending with a story that feels hopeful for young readers?



As I see it, the last two photographs seen and mentioned in *Young Man with Camera* offer hope in the absence of a neat-bow happy ending. The photograph we see fills a page and is the only one in the book not taken by T—. By holding an orange, which has become a symbol for friendship, Sean is wordlessly telling his best friend that their bond will endure in the face of any and all obstacles. The last paragraph in the story describes a photograph in which a tank has been stripped of its “tankness” — a hopeful act in its own right — and turned into a playground by a group of children who are smiling and will prevail, despite all the hardship they have known and that likely awaits.

5**Do you know T—’s real name?**

I do, but I promised him not to share it. What I love about this question is that there’s another question tucked inside, waiting to be unpacked: Why does T— not reveal his whole name? He offers us one reason: “I don’t like to write out my name because I know someone will come along and twist a normal name into something not-normal.” I don’t think T— isn’t giving us the whole picture, as he would say. He doesn’t mention the word “power.” All of us have more power than we realize, and here I’m reminded of one my favorite lyrics, this one by Bob Marley: “None but ourselves can free our minds.” And so by not sharing a name he is convinced will be twisted into a taunt, T— retains a bit of power, a bit of control. I see that dash as T—’s line in the sand.