



# The Sweet Smell of Failure: Stephan Pastis interview

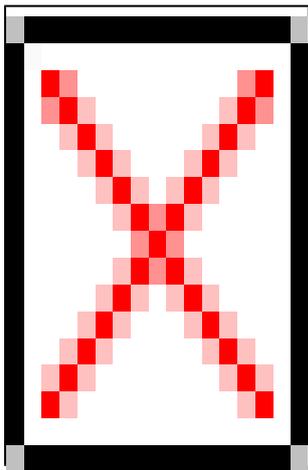
Article Author:

[Damian Kelleher](#) [1]

[212](#) [2]

Byline:

The creator of **Timmy Failure** talks to **Damian Kelleher**



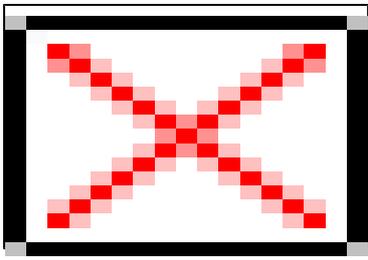
There's never been a boy detective quite like Timmy Failure. Striking a blow for underachievers everywhere, Timmy is determined to crack all the cases that come his way. He's set up his own detective agency - Total Failure, Inc. - and is in hot pursuit of culprits to some flagrant crimes. The fact that Timmy is actually not the brightest boy in his class is the least of his worries. In fact, he's pretty clueless about solving crime, and his business partner is a polar bear called Total who may (or may not) exist outside the realm of Timmy's jumbled mind. From what I knew of the detective genre as a kid - you know there was **Encyclopedia Brown**, the **Hardy Boys**, **Nancy Drew** - they were all really smart and able to solve anything. So then I thought, what if we had a kid who couldn't solve anything but fancied himself as a detective, and he's cocky about it? That made me laugh. The scene is set for some very, very funny middle grade fiction.

With book four **Sanitized for Your Protection** hitting the shops this October, I wonder if there may be any possibility that Timmy is ever going to get better at being a detective. Stephan ponders a moment. He's maturing a little, but I think he's just as dumb as he's ever been. The whole idea is that he has a massive blind spot. Timmy thinks he's a great detective - he really thinks that - and that everybody else is one step behind him. But the truth is, he's almost always the slowest kid in the room. And the difference between how a character perceives himself and who they are, to me that's the goal to humour. Like David Brent say, the Ricky Gervaise character in **The Office**. There's a great book by John Kennedy Toole called **A Confederacy of Dunces** with a character called Ignatius Reilly. He thinks he's great and he's just a loser. To me that's funny. If I had any role model for Timmy, it would be him.

One of Timmy's greatest assets (or hindrances, depending on how you look at it) is his business partner Total, the polar bear. Timmy comes from a single parent family - his mother struggles to make ends meet, another incentive for Timmy to contribute towards the family coffers - so to what extent is Total a surrogate dad to Timmy?

I think the reason subconsciously when I wrote it I chose a big strong animal is because he's a substitute father. Timmy picks on an animal in his head that is like his dad - if he is indeed imagining the bear...?

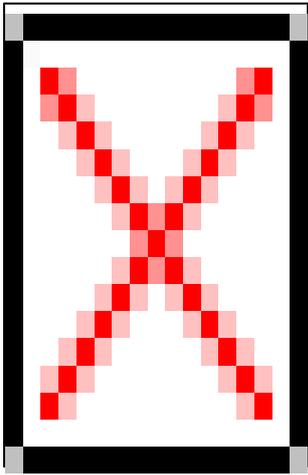
Ah yes, the bear. Because interestingly, nobody but Timmy ever mentions Total, the polar bear. Or talks to the bear. Or sees the bear. So can we safely assume the bear is just a figment of Timmy's fertile imagination?



"I never answer that!" Stephan says adamantly. "I think it's up to the reader to decide. Sometimes I ask kids that question and half of them think everybody sees Total, they think he's real ? and half of them think he's just in Timmy's imagination. I think the whole answer should be contained in the book, but you can see it both ways. Unless I screw up. There are a couple of moments you could question. There's a chair that breaks when Total sits on it in **Now Look What You've Done**. So the question is, did the chair really break or did Timmy break it? I think it's good to keep them guessing."

The relationship with Total is partly what gives the book another dimension that rarely arises in humorous middle grade series fiction, and that is the emotional impact of these books. Sure, they're packed with smart jokes, snappy one-liners and witty dialogue. But they also tap into a concealed vein of emotion that runs just beneath the surface.

"It turns out when I write that there seems to be a rhythm to how I work," Stephan explains. "It goes funny, funny,



funny, sweet, funny, funny. It seems to give the story more depth and texture. It gives it one more layer. Sometimes I question it. Sometimes I think I should just write a book where the goal of every chapter is just to be funny. But then I go and start writing, and I always revert to my pattern. I guess there's something in there."

There's a lot of funny in there and that is nothing less than you might expect from one of the US's most successful cartoon strip artists. Pastis' **Pearls Before Swine** currently appears in more than 700 newspapers all over the world (including London's **Metro** in the UK). Writing and drawing a strip a day is a hefty workload, though.

"It's a lot of hard work," Pastis agrees. "Monday to Thursday I write and draw 10 strips. That gives me three extra a week. That gives me the free time I need to write **Timmy Failure** every summer, and to tour. I tour a ton. By the end of the year, I've normally travelled for about ten weeks ? that's a lot. I need to slow that down a little."

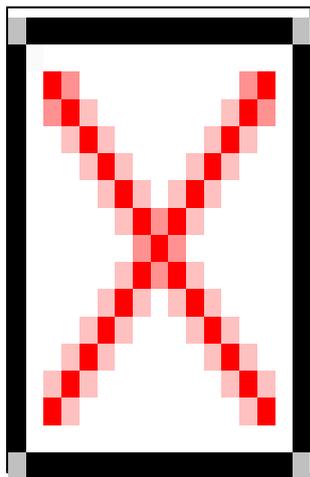
Does writing comic strips help him write his books, I ask, or does it get in the way?

"I have a chance to fail or succeed every day," he says about the strips. "I know from feedback if it's one or the other. So after 13 years of doing it, I have a pretty well-honed sense of when I hit the mark or not. When you go to write a book, that's a big advantage."

Nowadays, Pastis spends his days living and writing comic strips and books in California, but before he turned to strips, he earned his living by working as a lawyer. I put it to him that there probably weren't as many laughs in that line of work. "It was not a fun job, no."

He looks deadly serious. Why did you do it? "Why? Money. My family didn't have a lot of money when I was growing

up, and it was an instant way to have money.? So why give it up? ?I would have had a nervous breakdown. I couldn?t do it anymore.?



I ask him if he was drawing while he was working as a lawyer. ?Always ? on nights after work, at weekends, sometimes even in court I?d be drawing, whenever I could. I was in insurance defence, litigation. Yeah, it was misery. I?m atoning for my sins. I?m trying to make as many people laugh now as I made cry then.?

Timmy speaks in short snappy sentences reminiscent of Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade?s staccato monologues (?I went back and read Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett?) but the humour he evokes is more akin to surrealism than crime fiction. Pastis explains his unique method for writing.

?To this day, I don?t know how you write a book. I don?t outline. My whole theory of creativity ? and I don?t think a lot of people share this in writing, though in music they do ? is that I write on the right side of the brain. So I play very loud music that disrupts the cognitive part of the brain from logically thinking things through. You can?t think, your brain can?t focus. Then I write what comes into my head. And the result is your subconscious working at it instead of your conscious. So if you ask me, ?Where did the polar bear come from?? the real answer is it comes from really loud music, incense and coffee, and that?s what came out of my fingers.? Out of curiosity I ask him, what kind of music? He produces his iPhone, and starts to scroll down. ?It tends to be moody music. I just have numbered playlists but there?s a lot of U2, Mountain Goats, Arcade Fire and Dylan, Pink Floyd and Moby.? He puts his phone away. ?My friend calls it ?music to kill yourself by?. I have headphones. I swear, I?m going to lose my hearing at some point??

**Damian Kelleher** is a journalist and writer.

The Timmy Failure books **Mistakes Were Made, Now Look What You?ve Done**, and [We Meet Again](#) [3] are published by Walker Books. There?s more about [Timmy on the website](#) [4].

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