



# AN INTERVIEW WITH LOUIS SACHAR

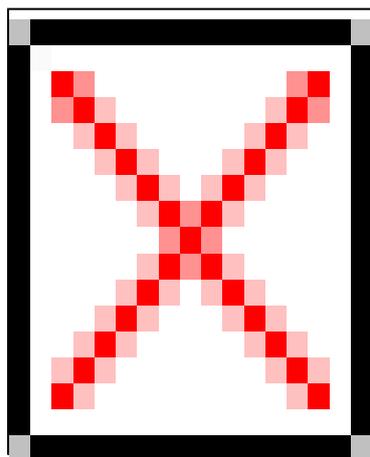
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[Graham Marks](#) [1]

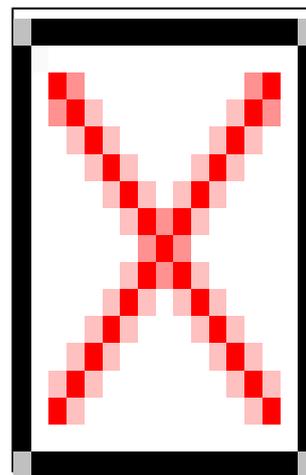
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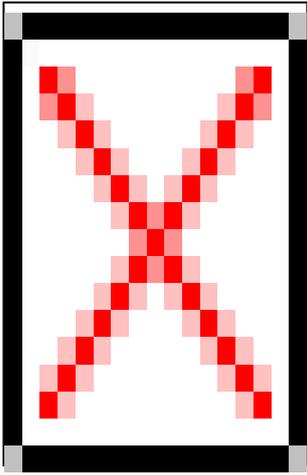
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Graham Marks to the bestselling author about his new book **Fuzzy Mud**.



**Fuzzy Mud** is the first new novel in four years from Louis Sachar, creator of **There?s a Boy in the Girls? Bathroom** and the multimillion-copy bestseller [Holes](#) [3]. Sharp on bullying and the small humiliations of school, [Fuzzy Mud](#) [4] also has a powerful ecological theme. Graham Marks interviewed Sachar about the book for **Books for Keeps**.

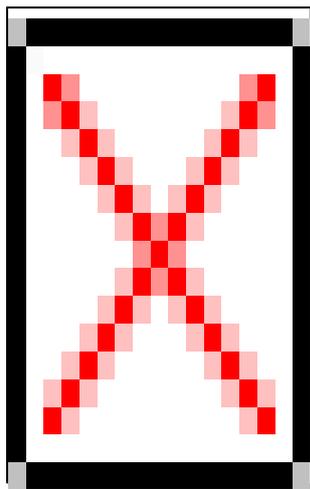


When someone has had a stand-out, headline success ? be it a song, a film or a  book - it can become the focus, the thing everyone always wants to talk about and the question an interviewee probably least wants to hear, after ?How much do you earn??. So there will be no mention today of **Holes**; today is all about Louis Sachar?s new book, [Fuzzy Mud](#) [4].

I had recently heard an interview Louis Sachar did on PBS, the American version of the BBC, in which he?d said that, as he?d got older, it had become harder, more of a challenge for him to put himself into a young mindset. From where I was sitting, I told him, it seemed to be a challenge he still relished. ?Part of it is this is where my audience is,? he says in reply, ?so that is who I?ve been writing for for forty years. I also like having young people as my protagonists. I think the world is just still so wide open to them. They haven?t become jaded or stuck in their ways. They?re eager and earnest, they?re joyful and their sorrows, which may seem petty to us, are full-blown to them. I like all that.? What had made writing **Fuzzy Mud** more difficult for him, Louis says, besides getting the right mindset, was that his previous

books had always been very optimistic. ?If there?s a link, a common link to all my books, it?s ?If you persevere and stay true to yourself, you?ll come out on top?..?

When he started writing **Fuzzy Mud** he had not, he says, been feeling optimistic for a few years, as evidenced by



the novel in question. He?d become very concerned about the environment and the effects of overpopulation on the planet, and he was finding it hard to write an optimistic book for kids. ?And I certainly didn?t want to write a depressing one,? he says. ?Basically, the answer that I gave myself, that gave me the motivation to write it, was that I still believed in the kids themselves. There may be seven billion people in the world, but each individual kid is still just as unique, and has just as much potential as anyone who?s ever lived. That was how I got around that. I was just trying to make my characters strong and creative, and as earnest as anyone, and any kid before them.?

There is something of a dystopian edge to [\[5\]Fuzzy Mud \[4\]](#), but it?s not as two-dimensional as that, its plot being described by one reviewer as an eco-bio-terror-mystery-comedy. If this makes the book sound like a mish-mash, it isn?t, but where did that singular mix come from? ?Again, from my fear of what this planet is heading for,? says Louis, ?combined with my love of the characters, love of the kids; while trying to explain the danger, I still wanted to be positive.?

No two authors ever write in exactly the same way, each with a process as unique as their fingerprints; Louis, it turns out, is someone whose books go through many, many drafts, and not because he?s particularly picky, but because when he starts a story he has no idea where it?s going. ?I don?t have any kind of outline, I just start with something that intrigues me,? he says. ?I think in this case it was the strange substance being found in the woods. How it got there is different now than it was when I started. I just make it up as I go along and I go off in a lot of different directions that don?t work, then I go through it a second time, and this time I might have a much better idea of who the characters are, and where the story should be heading, what the right tone is. I?ll rewrite it a second time, and then a third time, and then a fourth time, and probably at least seven times.?

Seven times. The mind boggles, at least mine does. But Louis seems to be a writer who works in layers, building up character and plot until he?s satisfied with the form, ??and then, with the last two or three versions, I?m mostly concerned with trying to tell the story as artistically as possible; there are overlaps but the final draft is definitely very different from the first one.?

I wondered if anyone had died in an early iteration of **Fuzzy Mud**, only to get resurrected later on. ?Chad died,? Louis admits, ?but that was too dark; I didn?t like that draft. I was just trying things out, I really didn?t know where the story was going - I think it was in the first draft I had Chad die?Tamaya didn?t go back to look for him. Like I said, I start different things and it was just too dark, it wasn?t a fun story and I just jettisoned it.?

At the heart of the book, the MacGuffin, if you will, is Biolene, a substance which will cure humanity's self-destructive addiction to petrol. Conspiracy theorists would say, would insist even, that there is already a clean alternative to petrol out there, and that ?they? won?t let us have it, until the oil runs out. Did Louis you think there?s a version of the Biolene out there, right now? ?It?s funny?I?m an avid bridge player and I was playing in a national bridge tournament in Chicago, just last week. I ended up playing on a team with people I hadn?t met before but - and you asked about kids

growing up - there were two 30 year olds who actually were fans of my work. They were real excited to be on the team with me as they'd grown up reading my books. One of them, who knew nothing about Fuzzy Mud, turned out to be a biochemist. I asked him what he was working on, and he said they were working on making biofuels out of bacteria. I said, "That's exactly what my new book's about!?"

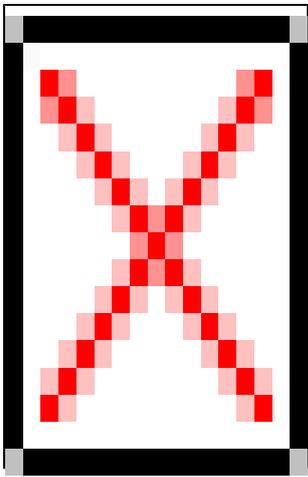
While **Fuzzy Mud** isn't science fiction, in the classic or even post-modern sense, there is quite a lot of science woven through the storyline and in fact the "villains" are tiny little things called ergonyms. Was there actual science here that he'd had to research, or had he done what authors do and just made it all up? I listened to a lecturer talk about the rapid population increases of bacteria. How they multiply every? I think it's actually even faster than they were in **Fuzzy Mud**, like every twenty six minutes that a bacteria population will double. They went on to say that at that rate, within a very short time, it might have been days or it might have been a month, the earth would be two feet deep in that bacteria, and within six months it would completely fill the entire universe. The only thing that keeps the population down is the fact that every biosphere has what's called a carrying capacity and there aren't the nutrients to let that happen. That I found out long after I'd written the book.

Amidst all the mystery, and the somewhat apocalyptic vision of a possible future, there is this classic, I want to say, romance, but it's more of a kind of teenage crush, all bound together and fueled by the hormonal soup of the early teenage years. That might have been a difficult balance to maintain, but Louis says it wasn't because of the age gap between the two lead characters - Tamaya is 11 and Marshall is 13. "I don't think there's very much sexual at that age," he says, "and it says very early on in the book that she wasn't even sure she liked him anymore because he'd been such a jerk lately. Which, we find out later, is because his life is being turned into hell by Chad. So, no, I didn't have any trouble with their relationship."

My reading of the book gave me the impression that Louis never specified where his lead character, Tamaya Dhilwaddi, came from, or what she looked like, but left it up to us to decide for ourselves; I thought she must have Asian, or Indian heritage and wondered what she looked like to him? "It doesn't matter what she looks like to me, but it's mentioned that she's got darker skin, especially compared to Marshall's very pale skin. Other than that, it really doesn't matter. I just think that the United States now is a very diverse country, and I just wanted her to reflect that, without necessarily being one particular ethnicity."

Dr "Fitzy" Fitzman, the creator of Biolene, is the one person described in quite a lot of detail in the Senate transcripts which are an integral part of the story - was he interesting to write because he was crazy? "A transcript is just a verbatim account of what is said, and in order to give it any kind of life, I had to try to throw in different aspects of Fitzy's behavior just to make it interesting, while keeping to the form of just stating what was being said, with no exclamation points." Having decided to use a Q & A format for transcripts, did he ever feel it was stifling the storytelling at all? "I would say I never thought it did," is the quick response. "I felt that every one of those hearings had interesting little quirks and humour in them, and also moved the story along."

I didn't think anyone from the scientific community came out of **Fuzzy Mud** particularly well; was that just a stance he'd taken for the book, or is it what he really believes? "I don't think that Fitzy is so bad, he was just trying to do something good. He was trying to make money also, but he seemed genuinely concerned about Tamaya and what was happening. I think if anybody comes out bad it's the Senators. It's interesting, because I think people have taken some of Fitzy's statements too literally; they talk about him being a mad scientist in some of the reviews. I don't see him that way. I think that's more of a colleague's opinion?he's just quirky?. True, Dr. Fitzman is quirky, but isn't he also quite dangerous at the same time, because he doesn't see the wider implications of his work? He seems to be purely interested in the idea, which is often how scientists are depicted, as people who can sometimes be taken aback by what their ideas can actually do. "Yeah," says Louis, "I think that's definitely true."



There was a five year gap between [The Cardturner](#) [6] and **Fuzzy Mud** and as we came to a close I wondered if Louis was already at work on the next idea. "I do not have anything on the go, unfortunately. I need to. I'm much happier when I'm in the middle of something. It's much more fulfilling to get up every day and get to work and be engrossed in something I'm writing. I'm looking forward to getting started on something new, but right now I'm not."

Is he the kind of writer who waits for an idea to grab him, or does he go in search of inspiration? "I sit at my desk," he says, "and I try to come up with ideas. I play with different ideas, until I find one that—like I said earlier, I may not know what the story's going to be about, but if there's something there that intrigues me I write a little bit more about it, see if it grows. Over the last few years, there's been a lot of distraction and I just haven't clicked on anything yet." That aspect of Louis' writing, the playfulness, comes across quite strongly in [Fuzzy Mud](#) [4]. Did he have a good time writing it? "Yeah," he says, "I have a good time writing all my books. They're difficult, but that's what makes it worthwhile."

**Graham Marks** is a writer and journalist. His latest book, **Bad Bones**, is published by Stripes.

[Fuzzy Mud](#) [4] is published by Bloomsbury Children's Books, 978-1408864746, £12.99 hbk

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