

The BiblioFiles: Pseudonymous Bosch

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. My guest is Pseudonymous Bosch, author of the Secret series, which starts with *The Name of This Book is Secret* and continues with *If You're Reading This, It's Too Late*; *This Book is Not Good For You*; and *This Isn't What It Looks Like*.

Cassandra and Max-Ernest-- not their real names, of course-- are two average kids living in a town like the one you live in. Well, Cass and Max-Ernest are as average as you can be providing that you are the heir to a huge secret that could mean the downfall of the world as you know it and have a dangerous underground society called the Masters of the Midnight Sun pursuing you. Yes, just an average sort of life where you are constantly wondering if you're going to be kidnapped, then you actually are kidnapped and barely escape, and then you discover a type of chocolate that allows you to time travel. Did we mention the sock monster? Swords disguised as violin bows? Recipes for survivalist trail mix?

As bad as these books are for you, they've somehow been New York Times bestsellers and have been nominated for honors such as the Edgar Award and the EB White Award. And one even won the NAPPA Gold Award in 2007. Not that you should read them yourselves, though. In fact, you should stay far, far away from them.

The fifth and final book in this series, *You Have To Stop This*, was released this September. Don't read it. And don't ask your friends what happens in the end, either. That's just cheating.

The attributed author of these books, Pseudonymous Bosch, joins us from an undisclosed location on a continent we'd rather not mention for safety's sake. Mr. Bosch, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Uh, thank you. I just want to establish one thing. You're not recording this conversation, are you?

DR. DANA: Of course not.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Oh, OK. I feel much better. What did you want to ask?

DR. DANA: When did you first encounter the story of Cass and Max-Ernest?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Well, there's a secret story behind the name of *This Book is Secret*. Would you like to hear it?

DR. DANA: I would, definitely.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: It's just between us, right?

DR. DANA: Of course.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Well, this story first emerged out of a volunteer program I was part of in an elementary school. I was a volunteer, not an elementary school student. The program was called Writing Partners. And in the Writing Partners program, fourth- and fifth-graders at the school were partnered with adults outside the school sort of as pen pals, and we were meant to exchange writing with each other for comment and critique. As peers, you understand, not so much as adult and child.

And I had a writing partner named May, who was a fourth-grader at the time. The book *The Name of This Book is Secret*, you'll see, is dedicated to WP May. That stands for Writing Partner May. And as my writing partner, May sent me stories that she wrote, and poems, and a cartoon strip she drew about a chocolate bar that was afraid of being eaten.

And I didn't have anything to send her, so I decided to write a book. But I couldn't think what the book was called. And I thought and thought, and no title came to mind, until suddenly it occurred to me, maybe the reason I don't know the name of the book is that the name of this book is secret.

So then I thought, well, what should this book be about? And I-- well, of course, it's secret. So I wrote a preface about this secret that still is in the book today. I sent it to May and she was intrigued, and she wanted to know what the secret was. So then I sat down and I wrote a chapter that was all X's, because it was so secret it couldn't be revealed. And she wrote back, why don't you send me a real chapter?

So that was when the characters of Cass and Max-Ernest emerged, and I started writing their story in installments through the mail. May would give me her comments, tell me what words that I'd misspelled and where my grammar was bad, that kind of thing.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHTER]

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: And-- oh, but she was encouraging and she wanted to read more, and she started showing it to her family and friends, and they all wanted more chapters. And pretty soon, I'd written almost an entire novel through the mail. And that is the secret story behind *The Name of This Book is Secret*.

DR. DANA: Well, your narrative voice is just as much a part of these books as your main characters', and yet we don't really know who you are. What extraordinary measures have you taken to preserve your true identity?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Well, I try to always, always wear sunglasses. Because I find that that's the first thing to signal that I'm wearing a disguise. But I spend my life on the run, in hiding.

I tend to have to duck not only from villains but also from curious readers. That is me hiding behind the bookshelf in your bookstore, trying to nab all the books off the shelf. It's a solitary life, as it is for many writers, but the difference is that I'm constantly in motion.

DR. DANA: Do you really like chocolate as much as you say in your books? Or is it just code for another food, like kale?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Ah. How did you know? No, you know, I have been known to eat kale once or twice, but I would say that chocolate is a much more steady part of my diet-- the darker the better. I'm not really one for milk chocolate, although in emergencies-- I can't tell you the brand that I like the best, however, because my enemies-- by whom I mean my readers-- might track me down through the wrappers of the chocolate bars. So I'm going to have to stay secret about that.

DR. DANA: Now there is a video of you on your website. Two nosy readers managed to track you down into a chocolate shop in which the sign is clearly displayed. Is the chocolate good there at Valerie's?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Ahhh! Your eyes are too good. But yes, I will tell you that yes, it's a great place. They have great salt-and-pepper chocolate and some other delicious things as well.

DR. DANA: See, only a true chocolate freak like myself would be freeze-frame that. [LAUGHS] I was like, ooh.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: That's in Los Angeles, far, far from where I am at the moment.

DR. DANA: I'd like to talk to you about the major villains of the story, Miss Mauvais and Dr. L. I'm wondering if we could ask you to read a passage from your first book, *The Name of This Book is Secret*, that features them.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Mm-hm. Normally, I wouldn't want anybody to hear this, but since you've been so kind. And like you said-- isn't being recorded.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce this passage by saying that Cass and Max-Ernest have snuck into the former home of a magician and are surprised by Gloria Fortune, a real estate agent who is showing the place to a couple. The kids are hiding in a secret room with their dog, Sebastian. But they can hear and see what is happening. They, like the reader, are encountering the book's villains for the first time.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: And here we go.

"You know I had a feeling about this house,' Gloria continued, 'that the right couple would just fall in love with it. So romantic, isn't it, Doctor...?'"

'Dr. L,' said a deep voice with one of those elusive accents you can't quite identify no matter how hard you try.

'Oh, L what?' asked Gloria.

'Just L,' he responded in the smug tone of someone who's just won an argument.

'I see,' said Gloria, who clearly did not see at all. 'And that makes you Mrs....'"

'It's Ms. Mauvais,' answered a woman, evidently Ms. Mauvais, her voice tinkling in a way that should have sounded light and musical but instead sounded icy and unpleasant.

'Oh, so then you didn't take your husband's name, or rather, I mean his initial?'

'Apparently not,' said Ms. Mauvais, as she and Dr. L finally came into view towering above the short real estate agent.

Cass pressed her face against the grate to get a better look at those newlywed house-hunters.

Gloria was not exaggerating when she said they made a "striking couple."

Dr. L was tall and tan and had the whitest teeth Cass had ever seen. He wore a gray suit with a silver tie, and he had silver hair that looked like it had been blowing in a wind; and yet his hair never moved. Despite the color of his hair, he didn't have any wrinkles on his face. He was so handsome that he seemed far away even when he was close.

If anything, Ms. Mauvais was even more dazzling and not just because she was dripping with gold jewelry. She was almost as tall as Dr. L and she had a teeny-tiny waist-- like a Barbie doll brought to life. She had blond Barbie hair that swooped up from her forehead forming a perfect golden helmet, not a strand out of place. She had blue Barbie eyes that were big and round and sparkling and never seemed to blink. Her skin, too, was smooth and flawless like a doll's. No part of her face ever moved, even when she spoke.

It was as if she and Dr. L had taken photographs of themselves at just the perfect moments when they looked their absolute best, and then they had cast a spell so that they would look like their photographs forever.

One other thing was strange about them. They both wore gloves on their hands. Even though the day was really warm.

They were terrifying. At least to Cass.

Max-Ernest, on the other hand, was transfixed. 'That's the prettiest woman I've ever seen,' he whispered when Cass finally released her hand.

'Are you crazy?' Cass whispered back. 'She looks like a zombie. They both do.'

Ms. Mauvais was looking toward them, something like a quizzical expression on her face. For a second, they thought she'd heard them, but perhaps this was just how she always looked. Then she turned back towards Gloria.

'I see you've cleared out all of the previous occupant's belongings,' said Ms. Mauvais. 'A magician, did you say he was?'

"Well, no, I don't think I mentioned it. Or rather I must have!" Gloria laughed. 'How else would you know?'

'How else indeed,' said Ms. Mauvais, while surreptitiously eyeing Dr. L. 'He must have had many interesting things. Could you tell much about the magician from his belongings?'

'Oh, no,' said Gloria. 'It was just a lot of junk... Wouldn't you like to see the other rooms?'

'So where is this "junk" now?' Ms. Mauvais persisted, ignoring Gloria's suggestion.

'Oh, I gave it all away.'

'I see. And whom did you give it to?' continued Ms. Mauvais, as casually as if she were asking about the weather.

When she heard this last question, Cass found herself shaking your head 'no,' silently willing Gloria not to answer. For some reason-- maybe it was the way Sebastian was reacting to them, or was it just the sound of their voices?-- she didn't think Dr. L and Ms. Mauvais were really house-hunting. She wasn't even sure they were newlyweds at all. What she was sure of was that she didn't want them ever to go anywhere near her grandfathers' antique store.

'Oh, I can't remember. I think I threw it all away,' said Gloria, perhaps thinking the same thing.

Cass breathed a sigh of relief.

Dr. L took a step toward Gloria. 'So this magician of yours, he didn't leave any papers or files that would tell us something about him?'

Gloria shook her head nervously and took a step backwards. 'No, nothing like that.'

Dr. L looked piercingly at her, like a prosecutor interrogating a witness. 'A leather notebook perhaps? Think hard.'

When Max-Ernest heard this, he coughed and flung back his head, knocking over a pile of boxes.

It's hard to say what happened in the commotion that followed. This much Cass would remember later: when she and Max-Ernest and Sebastian exited the bathroom, she looked directly at Dr. L and Ms. Mauvais and she said, 'I think the notebook you're looking for is in there.'

As the two stunned grown-ups scrambled into the bathroom, Cass shut the door on them and headed towards the elevator. Gloria stared at them in surprise.

'What are you kids doing here?!' she asked sharply. 'You're trespassing. This is private property. Hey, I know you,' she added, looking at Cass. 'You're that pesky little girl from Larry and Wayne's.'

'Run!' shouted Cass, pushing Sebastian toward open elevator.

'Come back here right now!' shouted Gloria. 'And what's that in your hand?!

'Um, up!' Cass said, as soon as they were inside the elevator.

Nothing happened.

'I mean, please!' The elevator started to move.

'Stop! Thief!' shouted Gloria, waddling up to the elevator, but she was too late.

As for Dr. L and Ms. Mauvais, they managed to get out of the magician's study just in time to see the elevator closing on Cass and Max-Ernest.

And to see Cass clutching the magician's notebook tight in her hand."

DR. DANA: Up until now, the story has been a bit of a fun adventure. But this is the part where we learn that the situation could really be much more dangerous than the kids expect. Ms. Mauvais and Dr. L are dangerous, but they're there also beautiful, rich people. Does that make them more sinister to you?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Um, I would say yes, in short. Villains, I think, in books in general, and also in life, are more dangerous when they're seductive in some way and when they exemplify something that, at least to somebody, might be desirable, whether that's wealth or beauty or brains or what have you. When people have something that you want, they're more likely to be in power over you. So, yes.

DR. DANA: In the third book, *This Book is Not Good For You*, we learn that Señor Hugo, another evil member of the Midnight Sun, has made a chocolate that makes whoever eat it travel back in time. That's pretty fantastical. How did you react when you heard about this chocolate?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Or-- or tasted it. Who knows?

DR. DANA: Mm.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Um, flavors and scents, especially, you know, have a tendency to make you time travel at least in your own head, you know, in your memories. I think most people would agree that sense and flavors, almost more than any other kind of sensory input, can transport you to an earlier part of your childhood or what have you. So I don't actually think it's that surprising that there would be a chocolate that could make you travel centuries into the past.

DR. DANA: So if you ate the chocolate and you time-traveled to your ancestral past, what would it be?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Ah, the ancestral past of Pseudonymous Bosch?

DR. DANA: [LAUGHS] Yeah.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Well, it's cloaked in mystery, of course. But I suspect there was more than one mime back there somewhere.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHS] That's totally terrifying. [LAUGHS] Can I ask a nerdy reader question?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Please do.

DR. DANA: When Cass has her fortune read by Claire the seer at the beginning of the fourth book, there's a fly buzzing around. And then when she has her fortune read at the end of the book, there's a fly buzzing around. There's also a fly on the cover and the spine illustrations. Is there some sort of connection? Or am I reading too much into it?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: What did you think the connection might be?

DR. DANA: Time flies.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Ah. [LAUGHS] That did occur to me. And also, This Isn't What It Looks Like-- each book, as you probably are aware, is connected to one of the senses. The first book, there's the Symphony of Smells, the box of scented vials where each scent in the box corresponds to an instrument in the orchestra. And in the second book, there's the Sound Prism. In the third book, there's the chocolate that you've already mentioned. In the fourth book, the sense is sight, and you know, somehow the many eyes of the fly was in my mind a little bit.

DR. DANA: So these books pull from so many different places. I mean, there's some Egyptology. There's some-- it's either medieval or Renaissance. [LAUGHS] Who cares what the difference is, right? There's some of that in there. There's survivalism, there's proposed epic disasters and things. So I mean, how did you pull all these things in different places to put them in?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Well, I was once asked about the rules in my universe. In most fantasy books and science-fiction, you'll find that there are a set of rules that sort of make sense of the outlandish, fantastical world that you're reading about. But the person who was asking me this question implied that there were no rules in my universe, that there might be, for example,

time-travel chocolate, or things from the Renaissance or medieval times, or ancient Egypt, or what have you, and we just bounced around and there was no rhyme or reason.

And, of course, I plead guilty. There are no rules in my universe. It's semi-intentional, in the sense that I really feel the books are about imagination and the love of stories, and just the surprising things that can happen. And I think the rule that I follow is to try to surprise the reader and go in an unexpected direction. So I think that's why so many crazy things happen and we go so many crazy places in the Secret series.

DR. DANA: Despite being secret, these books are award-winners and bestsellers. I'm sure you get lots of letters and gifts from readers. What's the strangest letter or gift you've ever received from a fan?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: I do get gifts and letters. I also get a lot of threats. If I don't reveal the secret right away, I will be drowned in mayonnaise, because they all know how much I'm afraid of mayonnaise. Or if I don't reveal my real name, they will send mayonnaise in the mail. There are a lot of mayonnaise threats.

I also get lots of messages in codes-- some of which I enjoy cracking; others that are just too obscure. Or sometimes, I suspect, incorrectly coded so that there's no way that I can do them.

I actually opened a fan letter just yesterday that was completely blank. And I, of course, immediately put it in the oven to warm it up and see if it had been written in lemon juice that would suddenly appear. But that didn't happen. I've looked at it under harsh lights. I looked under purple lights. I did not soak it in water. I guess that should be the next thing. But as far as I can tell, it was a blank letter. So perhaps that's the strangest I've ever received.

Of course, a lot of letters I receive are-- they'll be suspiciously grouped letters. There'll be seven or eight letters, all from the same address. Now yeah, if I were just naive, I would think that they all came from a classroom, which is what they're trying to suggest. But really, I know they're all part of a master plot to get me to reveal things I shouldn't.

DR. DANA: I bet you're right about that. Everyone knows that elementary school teachers are--

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Part of the Midnight Sun, exactly.

DR. DANA: Why else would they take jobs like that?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Right.

DR. DANA: The fifth and final book, *You Have To Stop This*, was released last month. How did it feel to complete this particular series?

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Scary. I've been doing this for a while, and a certain amount of pressure I was feeling, in terms of delivering on the last book. Of course, the big question on the

reader's minds-- will the secret be revealed? I'm not going to say anything about that, but I will say that I certainly put a lot of thought into how I was going to handle the issue.

And there's a certain sadness, too, because I feel like for the last five-plus years, as I've been writing this series, I've been in a kind of ongoing conversation with my readers. And it's exciting that it's coming to an end, but also a little bit sad.

DR. DANA: In the spirit of Max-Ernest's incredible knowledge of all things therapy, I'm wondering if we could end the interview with a little free association.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Oh, for some reason, I always go to platypus as soon as anyone says free association.

DR. DANA: Well, for those who don't know what free association is, it basically works like this. I'll say a word, and you respond with the first word that pops into your mind. You ready? Chocolate.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Platypus. No. [LAUGHS] Dark.

DR. DANA: Gloves.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: White.

DR. DANA: Elbow.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Knee.

DR. DANA: Twins.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Mm, evil.

DR. DANA: Jester.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Uh, Pseudonymous.

DR. DANA: Bestseller.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Yikes.

DR. DANA: Candelabra.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Candelabra? Uh, fire.

DR. DANA: Ears.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Pointy.

DR. DANA: Trap.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Door.

DR. DANA: Plush

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Carpet.

DR. DANA: Secret.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Big.

DR. DANA: Thank you, Mr. Bosch.

PSEUDONYMOUS BOSCH: Thank you, Dana.

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