

The BiblioFiles: M.T. Anderson

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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 M.T. Anderson, author of many books, including *The Game of Sunken Places* and *The Suburb Beyond the Stars*. *The Game of Sunken Places* begins with an elegant, gold leafed invitation addressed to Gregory Buchanan. Gregory and his best friend, Brian Thatz, accept the invitation and depart to the wilds of Vermont to visit Gregory's eccentric and wealthy uncle.

Uncle Max insists on doing things the old fashioned way-- and by old fashioned, I mean the early 1900s, when boys still wore knee socks and suffered wet tweed in stoic silence. Brian and Gregory discover an unusual game board, and are quickly swept into a weird world where the fate of two non-human races depends on the outcome of the game.

In the sequel, *The Suburb Beyond the Stars*, Brian and Gregory are once again involved with the creatures of the game, only this time one side is cheating and all of human civilization is at stake, starting with an eerie suburb that has sprung up on the original game site. The books are paced like an old fashioned boy's adventure novel, packed with quirky contemporary humor, and then perfectly placed against a spooky, mysterious backdrop, where danger lurks in the woods, under the earth, and on the green soccer fields of anti-suburbia.

In addition to *The Game of Sunken Places* series, M.T. Anderson has also written *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Volume One, The Pox Party*, which won a National Book Award in 2006 and was named a Michael L. Printz honor book in 2007. Its sequel, *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Volume Two, The Kingdom on the Waves*, also received a Michael L. Printz honor.

He's also authored award winning young adult books such as *Feed*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and won the LA Times Book Award, *Thirsty* and *Burger Wuss* and middle school books that include *Whales on Stilts*, *The Clue of the Linoleum Lederhosen*, and *Jasper Dash and the Flame Pits of Delaware*.

M.T. Anderson joins us from Cambridge, Massachusetts. Mr. Anderson, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

MT ANDERSON: Well, thank you.

DR. DANA: You wrote *The Game of Sunken Places* when you were 17. I'm interested to know what sort of person you were at 17, creating this story.

MT ANDERSON: Well, I was someone who really loved fantasy novels and science fiction novels. And I was also someone, I should say, who-- I think it was around that time-- I started to really love vintage clothing. So the characters in the book actually wear these funny clothes, these Edwardian clothes. And I think it was around that time that I actually started to wear vintage clothing, although some of it was only from the 1960s. It's harder to find 19th century clothes these days. But anyway, so that was the kind of person I was.

DR. DANA: So at 17 you just sat down and decided to type this out on your Apple computer?

MT ANDERSON: Right, well it is true that this is the early days of computers-- of personal computers, I mean. And so yeah, the computer I had was-- it was a Tandy computer. And in fact, when I decided, years and years later, that this was a book that had really stuck in my mind I really wanted to do something with it, I wanted to revise it and make it a real novel, one of the interesting things was that it was hard to find someone who could actually convert those old files and give me that data back.

So in fact, I ended up finding a guy at a university who could take the old floppy disks, which were literally floppy. They were actually made on some kind of thick, stiff mylar or something. I don't know what it was. But anyway, and you could then get the info off of that. And it came out in all of these little weird, three line parcels that I then had to rearrange in the right order. And--

DR. DANA: Wow.

MT ANDERSON: It was quite a labor of love. It actually, I think, was probably harder than retyping the whole book.

DR. DANA: The book wasn't published until 2004 though. And that's a long time of sitting in a drawer, following you through college, moving to various locations, riding with you through all your various life experiences.

MT ANDERSON: Yes, sitting on those awful floppy disks.

DR. DANA: Yeah, so did the story change much?

MT ANDERSON: Actually, one thing that did change was that a part of the twist at the end-- and I don't want to give anything away-- part of the twist at the end only occurred to me after all those years passed. And I should say that in general, for young writers, one of the things about revision that's really important is to leave the book alone for a period between each revision. So it doesn't have to be 10 years or whatever it was with me.

But I'm just saying, even if you leave it alone for a month, oftentimes solutions that you never would have thought of present themselves to you after that time, just because the whole time you're not looking at the book, thoughts are sinking in and mulching in your brain. And I think that that is one of the magnificent things about revision, is that you can take the time to let the thing alone and let it-- you can come back to it with fresh eyes and you can see stuff you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

DR. DANA: The first book is a mix of a bunch of different genres-- fantasy, mystery, classic boy adventure books, modern adventure, horror, science fiction. Would you be willing to read a passage that illustrates this blend of old school, contemporary humor, and spookiness?

MT ANDERSON: Sure, I can indeed.

DR. DANA: Let me introduce this briefly to say, it's from the first book, *The Game of Sunken Places*. And Brian and Gregory are really caught in the midst of this game that's taking them all through the woods, paths, mountains of Vermont. And now they've stumbled upon yet another piece of the game. And they're going to uncover it, literally.

MT ANDERSON: "As Gregory ran his hand lightly over the chipped surface of the mosaics, he realized that the globe in the robed child's hand was loose. It was at the center of the round floor. It looked like it would pull up easily. He quickly pulled his legs into a squatting position, wedged his fingers in the cracks on either side of the stone, and yanked.

'Brian!' he called. 'I think we've found the staircase.'

Brian came to his side and got down on his knees, and they pulled together. There was a clatter as the stone rose slightly then slammed down. They pulled again, and this time managed to slip their fingers beneath the stone before it could fall. They slid their fingers along one side of the rim and together tipped the capstone. It fell to the floor, rocking, leaving a dark hole where it had lain.

They peered into the darkness. Brian squinted and leaned down into the gap. An uneven stone staircase led down into some dark pit beneath the mock-temple. An unlit, evidently Victorian lantern hung on an iron hook by the steps.

Gregory was almost shaking with excitement. 'This is it. We've found it. We've found the mother lode. This is big.'

Brian nodded. 'It could be good,' he said. He fumbled in the pockets of his jacket and pulled out the box of wooden matches that they used to light the gas lamps at the house. He grabbed the rusty lantern by the handle and lit the wick. The wick was still good. Black, greasy smoke slid off the flame.

Brian gingerly placed his foot on the first step. They began to descend. They ducked their heads to avoid hitting the edge of the hole. The fire flickered across pitted stone as they left the rattle of the storm on leaves, the murky twilight, the scent of fresh rot, for the dry, blank silence of the subterranean staircase.

The steps wound around and around, steep and treacherous. No sound beside the clatter of their hard soles on stone reached their ears. Brian, in the lead, flicked his eyes around quickly in the cramped spaces, worried by the silence and the cold.

The stairs ended on what appeared to be a natural floor of rock. Brian swung the light around, and they saw that they had emerged in some small cavern. A slim, rocky bank led down to a motionless black river. The river led off in either direction through rough arches.

A small boat was bobbing near the shore — a skiff of eccentric design, with a slim, tall prow and, on the back, a complicated brass motor. Brian and Gregory backed against the rock wall and stared at the still water.

‘So we look at the boat?’ said Gregory.

‘Sure,’ said Brian.

They stood there without moving.

‘You go first,’ said Gregory.

‘Why?’

‘I’m thinking of the kinds of things that live on the bottom of subterranean lakes. In comic books.’

‘Yeah.’

‘With tentacles. They tend to attack barbarian heroes. You know. With something called a maw that drips ichor.’

Brian nodded. He repeated, ‘Ichor.’

‘Grond the Despoiler always approached rivers like this with a two-handed broadsword.’

They stared at the water. Brian said, ‘Well?’

Gregory corrected himself. ‘Sorry. He’s not called the Despoiler anymore. Not since he became king of Zolaria in issue seventy-four for feats of immense physical strength.’

Brian walked forward and went into the boat.

Gregory said, ‘See, you could become king of Zolaria for your bravery alone. Given that you’re not carrying a two-handed broadsword and your only other superpower is immense malcoordination.’

Nothing attacked.

The motor was ornately fashioned, with the pistons molded to resemble ranks of elephants’ heads and the valves decorated with brass vines and leaves. Ivory stops and plugs were placed here and there, highlighting the well-polished network of machinery. No obvious method

presented itself for steering the skiff; the only visible control was a large lever, forged to resemble a lightning bolt. The boat was held to the shore with two small brass chains that clipped onto hooks on the rock floor.

Tentatively, Brian stepped onto the boat.

‘Careful,’ Gregory said, and came forward. The boat swayed from side to side, and tiny ripples wandered outward from its gunwales.

Gregory stepped in, and Brian dropped down to steady the rocking.

‘This could be it,’ said Gregory. ‘This could be the way into the secret kingdom.’

‘Yeah,’ said Brian.

They inspected the motor. Gregory put his hand on the lightning bolt. ‘Here goes nothing,’ he said, and pulled down on the lever.

The engine flew into a frenzy of activity. The elephant heads jumped back and forth, their trunks sliding into tubes carved to resemble bamboo shoots. The mechanism rattled and chugged, and let forth a drizzle of stinking bluish-black smoke . . . but the boat itself didn’t move in the slightest. Gregory pushed up the lever, and the engine rumbled to a halt.

Brian leaned over to examine the motor, thinking that perhaps there was a throttle somewhere left in neutral. ‘There’s — there’s no propeller,’ he announced. He rolled up his sleeve and stuck his thick arm into the frigid water, groping. ‘There’s a hole there,’ he said. ‘Something where you could stick the propeller. That’s it.’

He sat up, his fingers aching from the cold, and pulled his sleeve back over his wet skin.

After a moment’s consideration, Gregory yanked the lever all the way down. The roar of the motor filled the cavern, but the boat showed no signs of any movement besides, perhaps, a general, sickening vibration. Gregory shut off the motor and frowned.

‘Where can we find a propeller?’ asked Brian.

There was no answer. They sat for a while in the rocking boat. Then they got out, steadying themselves on the side of the skiff. They stepped out onto the shore and, with a last look at the enigmatic boat, started to climb back up the steps.

In the cavern, the ripples slowly drifted from the craft’s sides and gradually faded away. The boat ceased to rock, and lay silent in the cavern as the boys’ footsteps grew distant and finally passed beyond hearing.”

DR. DANA: Did you originally intend to include all of the different genres in this book or is that just the way it worked out?

MT ANDERSON: Well my head was a mishmash of all that stuff so that's how it came out. I mean when I was writing it certainly, I didn't-- I thought about the fact that I wanted it to seem like one of those novels in which boys go on vacation to an eccentric relative's and discover a mysterious house filled with crazy stuff. I was very aware of that being the model. But I didn't really think much about the genre. I was just trying to tell a story.

DR. DANA: The next book in the series, *The Suburb Beyond the Stars*, was released in 2010. That's six years after the first book. How much had you changed as a writer and how did this impact the continuing story and the characters?

MT ANDERSON: Well, I had actually conceived the whole plot of *The Suburb Beyond the Stars* at the same time that I was revising *The Game of Sunken Places*. So it actually really did not change in its design much at all. The reason for that gap was that I was working on these two big historical novels, the Octavian Nothing books. And I kept on thinking that those books were going to go faster than they did.

And so, in a way, that was the problem-- was that I was focusing on those and I just couldn't find time to come back and finish these Norumbegan books, *The Game of Sunken Places* and *The Suburb Beyond the Stars*. I couldn't come back to them to finish off that series. So I do think that I definitely improved, in that time, as a writer. But because I had already charted out the story before that gap, I'm not sure how much the story changed.

DR. DANA: You mentioned the names of the alien races. I'm wondering if you could tell us the story behind the names of these two alien races?

MT ANDERSON: Sure, yeah. Well one of them, which is the Thusser-- that's one I just made up. But Norumbega-- because the one race of these elfin creatures that live under these mountains in New England is actually taken from, weirdly enough, this myth from the period of the colonization of America that there was this magical city, this El Dorado of New England up somewhere in the woods.

And so all of these people tried to find it. Supposedly, for example, the main account came from this guy who was on a slave ship, in fact. This was, I think, in the 17th century. He, for one reason or another, was dropped off down in the Gulf of Mexico. And he actually made his way all the way up the coast of what later became the USA.

And as he passed through the woods, somewhere in New England, he supposedly stayed in this city of Norumbega. And he has all these insane descriptions of it like, there are red sheep. And all of the houses are covered with gems and made of gold and they-- and everyone there speaks Latin. And all this kind of thing.

DR. DANA: Do you think he believed it or do you think he was just making it up?

MT ANDERSON: I have no idea.

DR. DANA: I mean, it's crazy.

MT ANDERSON: To some extent, for example, the Latin thing-- he probably himself didn't know Latin. So you could imagine that there would be some kind of native language that would somehow sound to him like Latin. But I do not have any explanation for the walls of gold and the gemstones. I don't know. But people took his report very seriously, though. Expeditions went down rivers in Maine, for example, to try to find this Norumbega. And it appears on a bunch of maps.

DR. DANA: Wow. That's really interesting. The second book in this series is much darker than the first. The threats are more extreme. The conflict between Brian and Gregory grows. The stakes become much higher. And at times the situation seems much more hopeless. Do you mind if I ask why you chose to go in that direction?

MT ANDERSON: Oh, I think just because if you're going to have something that's going to be an extended series like this, the first book is kind of the introduction to the ideas. And then the next three books-- because it's going to be four in all-- are more of a single sweep of action. And for something like that to sustain interest and immediacy over the three books, the three later books, you need to have the stakes be higher. So that was really my thought there. And also I just feel like that was more the way I was feeling when I was writing this book.

DR. DANA: Feeling more hopeless?

MT ANDERSON: I guess. Well, feeling that there are things that are really at stake in the world, in the real world. And that there is an urgency to the way that we act and that it is us. We are, in a sense, always the only people who stand in the way of chaos and destruction. I mean all of us need to be aware of our role in trying to protect the people that we love and that kind of thing. It doesn't happen naturally. It happens only by people being aware. And I guess that that's really important.

DR. DANA: This question is somewhat related to what you just said. I'd like to ask you about one of the settings in the second book, the suburbia that's being taken over by the alien race, the Thusser hoards. You dedicate a lot of description to the contrast between a seemingly normal, bland world of suburbia and the horror of it being warped into something alien.

You also comment on how the landscape is being obliterated as streams are shuttled into pipes, groves of trees are torn up, hills mown flat until they're unrecognizable-- I've definitely had the experience of getting lost in a sprawling suburban neighborhood and it's confusing. All the houses are the same. There's no landmarks to go by. Is this something that you've experienced as well and adapted for your books?

MT ANDERSON: Yeah, sure. And also I've had the experience of-- I'm someone who walks a lot in the woods. And that is probably a main reason why these books sometimes have a lot of walking in the woods. And when I was walking as a kid around the towns I grew up in-- in Stowe, Massachusetts, Acton, Massachusetts-- as I walked, year by year a lot of those woods would get eaten up.

And so it was always very striking. You walk someplace one month and it's this beautiful woodland, very creepy, in the early spring or late winter with all the trees looking black and they're dripping and everything else. You go back there in the height of summer expecting everything to be green and blooming and instead you discover that everywhere you walk, the whole topography you walked on, has been obliterated in now is just giant holes where they're building houses and that kind of thing. Because there was such a suburban revolution, when I was a teenager in particular. The area that I was living in was suddenly becoming a commuting suburb, whereas it had been a defunct farming town before.

DR. DANA: I had the exact same experience. It was so upsetting.

MT ANDERSON: It's very weird because it's almost like-- and this ties into the way that things happen in *The Suburb Beyond the Stars*-- it's almost like your memory itself is being obliterated. Because you see things that you remember so well suddenly being changed with something else interposed.

DR. DANA: And then there are just families sitting on top of it. And you think, no. This is where I used to ride my horse, through your living room.

MT ANDERSON: Right, exactly.

DR. DANA: Who are you people?

MT ANDERSON: Right, yeah, yeah.

DR. DANA: That's sad.

MT ANDERSON: I have to say though that this is-- I've written satirical books about that kind of thing. And this book is not supposed to be quite as satirical so much as that was just a fact of the landscape, a fact of life. And I was trying to capture what that landscape was like. In particular, because I got so sick of horror novels that take place in Victorian houses. You know what I mean?

Because the problem is that nowadays, when anyone goes-- and this actually is true with the first book in this series. But whenever anyone goes to a Victorian house you get suspicious. You know, when is the knocking going to happen on the door. And really it's not as frightening, I think, as when it's happening in a setting that's very familiar to us. So in the suburbs that many of us live in.

DR. DANA: Most of the action in this series takes place in Vermont. Why Vermont? Is that the best place for a subversive alien takeover?

MT ANDERSON: You'd think so. They are-- people in Vermont are talking about seceding from the Union. But I think the thing is that always-- since I was a kid we would go up to Vermont for vacations and stuff. And there is this sense that it's very sparsely populated. It's very heavily

wooded. It's far more heavily wooded now than it was in the 19th century, for example, when everything was cut down for sheep grazing and that kind of thing.

So it is a very mysterious place in a way. Because of the way the mountains are you can't actually really drive very easily east to west. So you're very constrained in the way that you move. And so somehow it seems like there are a lot of towns that get lost in Vermont. And I always loved that feeling of an untamed wilderness. So I thought that that was a great backdrop for a mysterious book like this. Because you could actually have a 400 acre piece of land with crazy stuff going on it. And no one would know about it. It would just be off on a dirt road somewhere and no one would notice.

DR. DANA: I'd like to ask you about the hilarious Suburb Beyond the Stars mini movie on your website.

MT ANDERSON: Sure, yeah.

DR. DANA: Book trailers are popular these days, but you took it a step further with a mini movie. Can you tell us about your inspiration for it without, of course, giving too much away?

MT ANDERSON: Well I will say that what it was is-- I watch these very brief book trailers that are a minute and a half or two minutes long, where the author will talk about the book and blah, blah, and why they wrote it. And I thought, wouldn't it be funny to have one of these that starts like it's going to be a little two minute clip of me talking and then actually something goes terribly, terribly, supernaturally wrong and suddenly we're caught up in the story.

And I have a friend who, believe it or not, used to be a Hollywood monster movie maker, among other things. He made a bunch of different kinds of movies. But he did a Stephen King adaptation and that kind of thing for Hollywood. And he said to me, yeah, you should completely do that. You should just make a little miniature movie. And I was like, OK. Let's do it.

So I handed him a video camera and we traipsed around in the woods. We had a huge amount of fun making this thing. I don't want to give away what happens. But it was like actually-- we felt very much like 14-year-old boys again, tromping around in the woods, making this movie. We had a great time doing it. And I thought that it was, in a way, a more perfect way to reintroduce the book than a book trailer. Because it really, I think, captures the mythology of the place that I'm trying to set up.

DR. DANA: I think your performance was Oscar-worthy.

MT ANDERSON: Well thanks. Especially I think I make some good faces.

DR. DANA: Yeah, I agree.

The second book ends with Brian and Gregory entering into another dimension to try to save the Earth. What other fabulous adventures are in store for these two American boys loose in another dimension?

MT ANDERSON: Well, the third book is called *The Empire of Gut and Bone*. And I will give away just the fact that it is them in this other world where these elfin creatures have fled to. And this world is entirely the inside of a giant dead god of some kind. So it's--

DR. DANA: Whoa.

MT ANDERSON: They're wandering around in the internal-- it's like a murder mystery set inside of a stomach or something. So that's the-- so the capital of this empire in this other world is actually in a place called the dry heart, which is a heart that happens to have been blocked. So you can actually walk around in it.

DR. DANA: Whoa. That was not the answer I was expecting.

MT ANDERSON: Well, you know, I try to keep you on your toes.

DR. DANA: Right. Wow. Well, M.T. Anderson, thank you so much for coming on the program today.

MT ANDERSON: Thank you for having me.

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