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The Homework Machine

By Dan Gutman

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Summary

Sam, Kelsey, Judy, and Brenton make up the D-Squad. They are forced to sit together during school because their last names all begin with a D, and they aren't very happy about it. Sam is a class clown, Kelsey is a slacker, Judy is a teacher's pet, and Brenton is just weird – they have nothing in common. That is, until Brenton creates a homework machine named Belch that does homework for you. Sam, Kelsey, and Judy soon find out about the homework machine and eventually everyone is spending afternoons at Brenton's house using Belch.

Pretty soon, the entire fifth grade starts to question why the D-Squad is spending so much time together outside of school. Miss Rasmussen, their teacher, begins to wonder why the D-Squad members have such good grades. Before long, it becomes more and more difficult to keep their secret, and Belch begins to do some unusual, frightening things. Will Belch end up causing more problems than it solved?



About the Author



Dan Gutman

I was born in New York City on October 19, 1955. When I was about a year old, my family moved to Newark, New Jersey, where I spent my childhood. It was pretty uneventful until June 1, 1968, when I came home from a Little League game and found that my dad had suddenly abandoned my mom, my sister Lucy, and me. It was pretty traumatic, as you can imagine, but we all survived.

I attended Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, graduating in 1977 with a degree in psychology. After spending a few unhappy years in graduate school, I decided that psychology was not for me. What I really wanted to do, I decided, was to be a writer.

I wanted to write humor, like Art Buchwald and Erma Bombeck. So I moved to New York City in 1980 (where all starving writers go) and began cranking out "humorous essays."

My essays weren't all that funny, though I did publish some in a Staten Island newspaper, the Advance. My first check (for \$15) is on the wall over my desk as I write this. I also had some of my photos published in the children's humor magazines Cracked and Crazy.

I tried writing magazine articles, with little success. I wrote a few screenplays, but never sold them. I thought I had some good book ideas, but publishers weren't interested. I received hundreds of rejection letters. It was very frustrating, but I was very determined

and persistent. I felt that I had some ability as a writer, but I didn't know where to direct it.

In 1982 the video game Pac-Man was a huge craze, and I started a video games magazine called Video Games Player. This was the first (and only) job I ever had. The magazine sold pretty well, and two years later it was renamed Computer Games. Most importantly, I met my future wife Nina while working on the magazine. She is an illustrator, and we hired her to draw game screens. We got married in 1983.

Whether I deserved it or not, I became known as a "computer expert." This was astonishing to me, because I knew next to nothing about computers (I still don't). But being the editor of Computer Games enabled me to write articles on the subject. I even wrote a newspaper column that was syndicated in The Philadelphia Inquirer, Miami Herald, and many other papers. I felt like a fraud the whole time.

When Computer Games went out of business in 1985, I decided to take a gamble and become a full time freelance writer. At first I wrote about computers, but gradually I started tackling other topics. Eventually, my writing crept into Esquire, Newsweek, Science Digest, Writer's Digest, Success, Psychology Today, New Woman, USA Today, and The Village Voice. I was gaining confidence as a writer, but I still hadn't found the type of writing I really wanted to do.

In 1987, I decided to try my hand at writing about something I always loved--sports. I sold an article to Discover magazine about the science behind the spitball, scuffball, and corked bats. This led to my first adult baseball book (*"It Ain't Cheatin' If You Don't Get Caught"*). It sold pretty well, and I wrote several more baseball books for adults. None of them were big sellers, but it was a lot more fun than writing about computers.

In 1992, when my son, Sam, was two years old, I decided to try writing for children. I wrote a few baseball books, then branched out to other sports--ice skating and gymnastics.

Up until this point, all my books were non-fiction. I never thought I would be any good at creating a story, but in 1994, I decided to give fiction a try. Surprisingly, I sold the first novel I wrote (*"They Came From Centerfield"*). It was fun to write, kids loved it, and I discovered how incredibly rewarding it is to take a blank page and turn it into a **WORLD**.

Finally, after fifteen years, I figured out what my career should be - writing fiction for kids. For the first time, I felt that I was doing something I was good at, something that was fun, creatively rewarding, and appreciated by an audience.

Kids often tell me that my books make them laugh. This is funny to me, because writing humor was what I wanted to do when I got started back in 1980! It just took me a while to figure out the best way to do it.

I am a member of SABR (Society for American Baseball Research) and SCBWI (Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators). I live in Haddonfield, New Jersey with my wife Nina and our children Sam and Emma.

-From www.dangutman.com

(Accessed April 2008)



Book Review

Fifth-grader Brenton is a computer genius, but the other three members of his work group think he's a nerd. So, when he tells them that he has invented a machine that does homework, they taunt him until he agrees to demonstrate. The machine actually works, and Kelsey, Sam, and Judy convince him to let them use it. At first, they are delighted with their freedom, but things quickly get out of hand. Their teacher is suspicious of the suddenly errorless work, and other friends resent the time that they spend together. The dynamics within the group are stressful as well. Judy, a talented student, feels guilty about cheating, but is pressured to excel. Kelsey is concerned that her friends will shun her for associating with nerds, but her improved grades earn privileges at home. Wisecracking Sam makes fun of Brenton but needs his help in playing chess by mail with his dad, who is serving in Iraq. The children gradually begin to bond, especially after Sam's father is killed in combat. Eventually, their secret causes conflict with the law. The story is told entirely through short excerpts from police interviews. This device shows the developing relationships through the kids' own observations. There are touches of humor in the way the four classmates talk about themselves and one another. Ominous hints about the legal trouble maintain tension throughout the story, but its exact nature isn't revealed until near the end. A dramatic and thought-provoking story with a strong message about honesty and friendship. -*Elaine E. Knight, Lincoln Elementary Schools, IL*

- From *School Library Journal*



Discussion Questions

1. What did you think about the format of this book? Did you like how the characters told their stories through their interviews with the police department, or did you find it confusing to have so many different points of view?
2. If you had a Homework Machine, what would you want to call it?
3. Judy is a teacher's pet, Kelsey is a slacker, Sam is the class clown, and Brenton is the nerd. Which character do you think you are most like?
4. Why do you think each of the characters were willing to use the Homework Machine, even though they know it is wrong to do so? Would you use a Homework Machine if you were able to?
5. Do you think Miss Rasmussen was a good teacher? Why or why not?
6. Why did Sam get mad when Judy made a Valentine's Day card for Brenton?
7. Near the end of the book, when everyone was about to get into trouble, Sam thinks about blaming the whole thing on Brenton. Why do you think he doesn't?
8. Sam waits a long time before he plays Brenton at chess. Why do you think he waits so long?
9. Why did Brenton tell the police and the school newspaper about the Homework Machine?
10. While you were reading the book, did you have any idea who Milner was? Why did you think he was trying to contact the D-Squad?



Author Interview

Live Online Interview with Dan Gutman

Kids, and adults, from around the country participated in a live online interview with author Dan Gutman on April 23, 2004. They asked him about his books, family, writing techniques, and more. Read to see what the author of *The Kid Who Ran for President* had to say.

What do you like most about being an author?

Gutman: The freedom! I don't have a boss telling me what to do, I don't have to go to an office somewhere, and I don't have to wear a jacket and tie.

What inspired you to be a writer?

Gutman: I never took a writing class in my life. I went to college, finished college, and didn't know what to do with myself. I thought, 'What am I good at?' I always liked writing letters to people, so I just started writing.

For people who have never read your books before, which book would be a good one to start out with?

Gutman: That's hard to say. It really depends on the person. I write a lot about sports, but not everybody loves sports. My favorites of my books are *Johnny Hangtime* and *Race for the Sky*. *Race* is about the Wright brothers and *Hangtime* is about a kid who is a Hollywood stuntman.

Did you want to be a writer when you were a kid?

Gutman: No. Not at all. I wanted to be a photographer, but I wasn't very good at it.

What is your favorite topic to write about?

Gutman: I like to take an ordinary kid and put that kid into an extraordinary situation. A kid runs for President of the U.S., or a kid finds the most valuable baseball card in the world. A kid gets the chance to shoot a single foul shot in basketball and if he makes it he

wins a million dollars. These are the kinds of things that I think kids fantasize about, so that's why I think they would make good stories.

Do you ever get writer's block? How do you help that?

Gutman: Everybody gets writer's block. What I'll do is I'll take a break—break the rhythm somehow: Go for a bike ride; get a bite to eat—so when I get back to the story, my brain is working again.

How long does it take you to write a book?

Gutman: I usually spend about three months or so on a book. Some books take longer. I worked on *Race for the Sky* for nine months. And my newest book, which is for kindergarten kids, I probably wrote in less than a week. That's called *Babe Ruth and the Ice Cream Mess*.

What is the most difficult part about writing a book?

Gutman: Probably the hardest part is rewriting. I know a lot of kids hate rewriting. It's difficult. Often you think the first time it's perfect, and you read it over again and you see it's not perfect. Your editor will point out where there are problems. Sometimes that's harder than the original writing process.

How do you get ideas for your books?

Gutman: From all different places. I read the newspaper every day. I watch TV. I listen to the radio. I go to the movies. I visit a lot of schools, where I have lunch with a small group of kids and they give me ideas. I have two children of my own, and they give me ideas. I'm constantly keeping my eyes and ears open for things I can make into an interesting story.

How do you pick the title of your books?

Gutman: Sometimes the title is obvious. Like what else would I call *The Kid Who Ran for President*? Other times, the title is not so obvious. I wrote a book that I titled *Mr. Perfect*, but the publisher didn't like the title. They wanted to call it *The Cyber Kid*. I didn't like that. We compromised and titled the book *Virtually Perfect*. I'll come up with a whole list of titles and when the book is finished, my editor and I will sit down and decide which one is best.

How does it feel to be a published author and to have lots of kids read, love, and admire your work?

Gutman: That's really the best part of what I do. As I said, I visit a lot of schools. I'll walk into a school and the kids will start to whisper, 'There he is,' like I'm a big celebrity. It makes me feel really good. Especially when kids tell me, 'I used to hate to read and that now all I want to do is read your book.' I was not a good reader myself when I was a kid. And I think I'm sensitive to kids who don't like to read. They

are the kids I'm really aiming at. So, it's a really good feeling to think that I could be turning some kids on to reading.

Did you like to read as a kid?

Gutman: No. I hated to read as a kid. I thought reading was boring and hard to do. My mother used to buy me comic books hoping it would get me interested in reading. It didn't really work. It wasn't until I was about in fourth grade or so and I became a big sports fan. Suddenly I wanted to know everything about sports, so I had to read about it. That's what got me interested in reading.

Which is harder to think of: the beginning or the ending of a book?

Gutman: Neither, the hardest part is the middle. I usually have the beginning and I have the ending from the start. Filling in everything that goes in between often is more difficult.

Do you think reading books helps people become better writers?

Gutman: Sure. Anything you read is going to make you a more knowledgeable and interesting person. That goes for anything else you do. Traveling or going to the movies. You learn about the world around you. The best way to increase your knowledge is to read.

Do you enjoy your work?

Gutman: Mostly, yes. Sometimes, it's lonely working by yourself. But for the most part I really like what I do and it certainly beats getting a new job.

Do you have a particular writing schedule each day?

Gutman: Yes. After the kids leave for school, that's my best writing time. From say 9 a.m to noon. I get my best work done then. Often, in the afternoon, my time will be spent checking my e-mail, making phone calls, or going to the library to do research for my books.

- Selections from:

http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/kids_primaries/activities/gutman/submit-question.asp

(Accessed April 2008)



Further Reading

If you liked *The Homework Machine*, by Dan Gutman, you might also like these books:

- *A View from Saturday* by E.L. Konigsburg
- *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney
- *Frindle* by Andrew Clements
- *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* by Louis Sachar
- *No Talking* by Andrew Clements
- *Someday Angeline* by Louis Sachar
- *Secret Identity* by Wendelin Van Draanen (part of the Shedderman series)
- *The Get Rich Quick Club* by Dan Gutman
- *Lawn Boy* by Gary Paulsen
- *How to Eat Fried Worms* by Thomas Rockwell
- *The Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume