

Everybody Sees the Ants

By A.S. King

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Lucky Linderman didn't ask for his life. He didn't ask his grandfather not to come home from the Vietnam War. He didn't ask for a father who never got over it. He didn't ask for a mother who keeps pretending their dysfunctional family is fine. And he didn't ask to be the target of Nader McMillan's relentless bullying, which has finally gone too far.

But Lucky has a secret--one that helps him wade through the mundane torture of his life. In his dreams, Lucky escapes to the war-ridden jungles of Laos--the prison his grandfather couldn't escape--where Lucky can be a real man, an adventurer, and a hero. It's dangerous and wild, and it's a place where his life just might be worth living. But how long can Lucky keep hiding in his dreams before reality forces its way inside?

Michael L. Printz Honor recipient A.S. King's smart, funny and boldly original writing shines in this powerful novel about learning to cope with the shrapnel life throws at you--and taking a stand against it.

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Everybody Sees the Ants By A.S. King Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #230652 in Books
- Brand: Little Brown Books for Young Readers
- Model: FBA-|283928
- Published on: 2012-09-18
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x .75" w x 5.50" l, .60 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Amazon Exclusive: A Q&A Between Paolo Bacigalupi and A.S. King

Paolo Bacigalupi is the Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author of *Ship Breaker*.

Paolo Bacigalupi: My first question is actually more of an admission: I don't normally get swallowed up in books. There's always something in the first few pages that seems boring or false and I can just as easily put the book down, but Lucky's voice was so smart and so wry and so... call it insurgent...that I couldn't put it down. I kept laughing as he skewered his parents and his school and his peers, and because of that hilarious wit, I was willing to go on with the story. So, my first question is where did Lucky Linderman come from? Why him? Why this voice? Why this boy?

A.S. King: Lucky's character sketch started with the emotional absence of his father due to the disappearance of his father in the Vietnam War and the effects of the disappearance on his entire family. Lucky's character grew as he faced injustice after injustice at the hands of a bully, the adults in his life and the school administration. And while all of Lucky's hardships are specific, as I wrote him I found that he is a very universal boy. He is all of us. When I discovered this, I couldn't not write him.

Paolo Bacigalupi: Part of *Everybody Sees the Ants* focuses on bullying, and it was interesting to read because it excavated some of my own experiences as a high school freshman and sophomore. I felt powerless to tell anyone what was happening, and yet also I remember feeling enraged and desperate to fight back. Were you ever bullied? Where did you draw Lucky's experiences from?

A.S. King: I was picked on a bit in high school. It was a lot of rumors and reactions, really. For the most part, when I went to high school the adults didn't do much about bullying. In fact, a few of them bullied kids right in front of us. One time in seventh grade a teacher picked up a kid and stuffed him in the trash can butt first. It was awful. I remember sitting there feeling so scared and hurt for the kid. But that was normal. It made you tough! It built character! Or so they said.

I think we all know someone who has had Lucky's experience in some way. I think all kids react to being "teased" differently, but for the most part people blow it off. Yes, it's been happening since the beginning of time, but I don't believe that just because something has happened since the beginning of time means we have to allow it to continue. I believe in evolution. We can change. We just haven't made the real effort yet because changing the world is a team sport.

Paolo Bacigalupi: Lucky's life in school is so miserable that dreaming of an internment camp in the jungles of Vietnam with leeches and pit traps and his maimed grandfather is preferable to real life. How did you end up incorporating Vietnam and POW/MIA issues into this story? Did you start with Lucky's grandfather's MIA story, or did Lucky's bullying and school come first? What was the impetus to bring these concepts together under one roof?

A.S. King: I've always been fascinated by the Vietnam War because I grew up in the 1970s, so I guess all my years of reading about it finally came out in Everybody Sees the Ants. When I started writing Lucky's character, I'd recently read a ton of books about the POW/MIA movement and I guess I focused on that

because it related to that unfair "people in charge aren't going about this in the right way" feeling that Lucky was also experiencing at school and with his parents.

Because I write books without outlining, it's hard to say which came first. In the plot, the bullying came first. It is a catalyst for everything--the trip west to Arizona, the dreams (and their indirect escape) and eventually the ants. But in the characterizations, the POW/MIA back story came first. It was the first thing Lucky talked about in my early character sketches--his parents, his grandmother's death and his missing Granddad Harry. The two subjects molded together naturally because there is a lot of emotional overlap.

Paolo Bacigalupi: Early in the book, Lucky wakes up from a dream about his POW grandfather... and he tells us he has his grandfather's half-smoked cigar clutched in his hand. The story treads interesting ground between madness and sanity, between fantasy and reality. You ride a lot of surreal edges where as a reader I found myself questioning whether Lucky had a grip on his sanity or whether he was completely off his rocker. That strikes me as rich, but also treacherous ground. The safe choice would have been to make this a completely "realistic" novel. What pushed you into wider territory?

A.S. King: I've never been a safe writer. The feeling that Lucky might be off his rocker is what I was aiming for, and that wider territory is the part of the map where I feel most comfortable. What is safe when it comes to books about real people? What's the difference between sanity and madness anyway? We all play head games with ourselves. We all have baggage. We all cope somehow. I'm not sure if I'm mad or sane. I mean, I hold my life together, I pay my bills, I raise my kids. But the world is so polarized and bizarre now that for some people, none of these things matter if they're not wearing the right shoes or don't have the right credit score or a fancy family car. Some people think the most important things to worry about are handbags and tan lines. Meanwhile war and crime and poverty unfold all around us and we ignore it. In that environment, how can we even begin to talk about sanity and madness?

When talking to adults about teenagers, adults often have this natural eye-rolling reaction. They sigh. They throw up their hands and say, "What am I going to do with this kid?" To most adults, teenagers are off their rockers. I don't agree with it and frankly, I think teens are often the more open-minded, challenging and clever people on the planet. Which is probably why adults tend to react the way they do.

Paolo Bacigalupi: As a follow-up to that, you seemed to revel in a certain craziness for all of your characters, surrounding Lucky with a cast of adults and peers who all seem to be struggling to keep a grip on their lives. Do you just think sanity is overrated?

A.S. King: True madness is a curse I wouldn't wish on anyone. Real sanity isn't overrated--it's being eroded. For me, watching one hour of any "normal" TV flips sanity on its back. Lucky Linderman, with his jungle prisons and partying, howitzer-toting ants, looks totally sane compared to most TV commercials. And his struggling family looks saner and more perfectly normal to me than so-called "reality" TV casts. The Lindermans are just like the rest of us. They have loss. They're lugging their baggage and trying to get by. They're faking a little because we all fake a little. They're daydreaming. They're lying to themselves. They're trying to find a way to be happy. They're stuck in a place where they're not comfortable, but they're trying to get better. And they're lucky--only sometimes they don't feel so lucky.

Paolo Bacigalupi: A lot of the story got me thinking about the roles of men and masculinity these days. Lucky is running into a lot of different questions about what it is to be a man. Is it manly to stand and fight? To just walk away from a fight? Is it manly to cook? Is it manly to hang out with your mom? Is it manly to build a spiked pit trap to kill someone? Is it manly to go see a play about vaginas? Is it manly to kiss a girl? It seems like you open up a lot of questions around this. Was that intentional?

A.S. King: Every one of those questions and responses was intentional--not so much from my mind, but from Lucky's natural character. I wish more people would question the roles of men and masculinity. I wish more people would break open the boxes we try to fit both genders into. I think these boxes lead to low self-esteem as does the strict genderization of just about everything from Happy Meals to college majors.

Think about how we genderize books--how we have so-called boy books and so-called girl books. Why shouldn't boys be interested in how girls think and the challenges of girlhood and womanhood? Doesn't it leave boys at a huge disadvantage when girls are often called "the only readers" who will read books with protagonists of any gender? I'm not saying boys should be interested in pink-covered books about periods. I'm just saying that there are too many people who would never recommend any female protagonist books to boys simply because…they never have. And this puts boys at a huge disadvantage as they begin relationships with young women later in their lives.

Paolo Bacigalupi: At one point, Lucky's uncle teaches him to lift weights--empowerment on a fundamental level that I have to admit that I found viscerally satisfying, but there's a lot of nuance to this question of physicality and masculinity, and the male characters--particularly the adult males like Lucky's father, who is not physically aggressive, and his Uncle who is-- seem to be both successes and failures depending on how you analyze them. I'm curious about what you think about when you look at Lucky growing into manhood, and how boys go about selecting the influences that will define them as men.

A.S. King: I think there's a very clear line between being macho and being masculine. And I think the most masculine thing in the world is to care about women--or humans, in general. I think Lucky cares deeply for his mother, and that might be because his father can't. I guess, in a lot of ways, Lucky is trying to take his father's place. Not just in his house with his mother, but in his dreams, caring about Granddad Linderman--because his dad still can't talk about it.

I think Lucky knows that his father is damaged and he's always wanted to help him, and at the end of the book, he's about to start on that journey. In the meantime, he was able to discern between the awesome Uncle Dave who taught him how to lift weights and the not-so-awesome Uncle Dave who doesn't treat women very nicely. He can take away the positive and leave the negative. I believe he can do the same with his father once he can see the good in him, too.

It's not just male influences that help define men as men. In the book, Lucky's self-esteem is reinforced by Ginny Clemens because she genuinely cares about him and knows he needs a friend. During their adventures, she forces him think about what he believes, and shows him how he's allowing people to treat him poorly. What an influence! I wish I could give every boy on the planet a Ginny Clemens.

Review

* "Blending magic and realism, this is a subtly written, profoundly honest novel about a kid falling through the cracks and pulling himself back up."
?***Booklist*, starred review**

* "King remarkably channels fifteen-year-old Lucky, creating one of the most believable teen male characters in young adult fiction.... This unique coming-of-age story will hold tremendous appeal for reluctant male readers."?***VOYA*, starred review**

* "A smart, funny, and passionate novel that embodies that idea that 'It Gets Better'--when you take action."?***Publishers Weekly*, starred review**

* "King's heartfelt tale easily blends realism and fantasy.... A haunting but at times funny tale about what it means to want to take one's life, but rising above it so that living becomes the better option."?***School Library Journal,*** **starred review**

* "The unusual and occasionally comic juxtaposition of the POW experience with Lucky's victimization... [offers] compelling food for thought about the things we can control and the things we can't, and how that distinction ultimately determines the need for action."?***The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books,*** **starred review**

* "King's themes of torture, physical and emotional imprisonment, and bullying connect in satisfying ways in this improbably witty and heartwarming story."?***The Horn Book*****, starred review**

"A resonant, uplifting story about not just getting through, but powering through, the tough times." ?***Kirkus Reviews***

About the Author
A.S. King is the author of the highly acclaimed *Reality Boy*; *Ask the Passengers*, a Los Angeles Times Book Prize winner; *Everybody Sees the Ants*; and the Edgar Award nominated, Michael L. Printz Honor book *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*. She is also the author of *The Dust of 100 Dogs*, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. When asked about her writing, King says, "Some people don't know if my characters are crazy or if they are experiencing something magical. I think that's an accurate description of how I feel every day." She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband and children.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Charles Anthony:

Book is to be different for every single grade. Book for children until finally adult are different content. We all know that that book is very important usually. The book Everybody Sees the Ants seemed to be making you to know about other information and of course you can take more information. It doesn't matter what advantages for you. The book Everybody Sees the Ants is not only giving you much more new information but also to get your friend when you feel bored. You can spend your current spend time to read your guide. Try to make relationship with the book Everybody Sees the Ants. You never sense lose out for everything in case you read some books.

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Vincent Olson:

Are you kind of hectic person, only have 10 or maybe 15 minute in your day time to upgrading your mind skill or thinking skill perhaps analytical thinking? Then you are experiencing problem with the book as compared to can satisfy your limited time to read it because all of this time you only find guide that need more time to be study. Everybody Sees the Ants can be your answer mainly because it can be read by a person who have those short spare time problems.

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