



MEMOIRS OF AN IMAGINARY FRIEND

by Matthew Dicks

About the Author

- A Conversation with Matthew Dicks

Behind the Novel

- “All Writers Start Out as Book Lovers”
An Original Essay by the Author

Keep on Reading

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

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Selection*

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A Conversation with Matthew Dicks

The first chapter of this novel is short—just half a page—but it sure packs a punch. How did you come up with the idea of starting with what is essentially Budo’s bio?

This story belongs to Budo as much as it does to Max. And while most readers will be familiar with a smart kid like Max (no matter how *different* he may be), they may not be familiar with a character who’s an imaginary friend. So I set out in that short page to establish who Budo is and—perhaps most importantly—what he knows.

There are many funny moments in this book. Many tender moments as well. Did you find it hard to move back and forth between the two?

I’m always immensely grateful when people mention the humor in *Memoirs of an Imaginary Friend*, perhaps because it’s so difficult to pull off. So thank you. I was often called a smart ass in school (and my mother always referred to me as The Instigator), so it’s probably fair to say that being funny comes naturally to me. As for the tender stuff . . . I’m a guy and I know how to be tough—when you have a last name like mine and you teach fifth graders, tough is the first thing you learn—but my students have also managed to soften me up a bit over the years. There’s such love between Budo and Max I felt that I had to show it in order to accurately portray their friendship. The hardest part, though, was showing that fondness without getting maudlin or sentimental, because that wouldn’t have suited Max in the least. And probably annoyed him, too.

How do you come up with names for your characters—real and imaginary?

I love coming up with character names, but some are easier than others. Max came to me because I want-

ed a name that was brisk and boyish, something that would easily fit an eight-year-old, and Max fit the bill. I’ve also had a few memorable boys named Max in my classroom over the years, and they left a strong impression on me. Giving Max their name was a bit of a nod to those extraordinary kids. Budo is the name of a real imaginary friend. I have friends with twin boys, and their shared imaginary friend (bizarre, I know) is named Budo. I loved the name so I stole it. Chomp, an imaginary friend you meet early in the book, is also one of their imaginary friends. Oswald is a name that has always conjured fear in me, probably the result of seeing the footage of Lee Harvey Oswald being shot when I was young. Before I realized that Oswald was going to be a benevolent character, I knew that Oswald would be a perfect name for him. The character of Mrs. Gosk was easy—that’s the name of a real teacher who is my mentor and friend.

I guess you could say that I like to blur the lines between fiction and the so-called real world. My daughter is named Clara after the main character in Cynthia Rylant’s *The Van Gogh Café*—one of my wife’s favorite books. My son is named Charles Wallace after the five-year-old boy in Madeline L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*. Oh—and while we’re on the subject, in England I’m published under the name of Matthew Green. I guess they figured that my real last name would cause too many jokes. Go figure.

Grown-ups use the phrase *on the spectrum* to describe Max. Is there a reason you didn’t give him a definite diagnosis such as *Asperger’s* or *autism*?

As a teacher I see children who are on the spectrum, and I try to understand each one as an individual. In fact, I like to understand all of my students as

“There’s such love between Budo and Max...I had to show it.”



About the Author

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individuals. That was my starting point with Max. A diagnosis can be very useful to a person and his family—it’s often the first step in getting proper treatment and support. But a diagnosis can also be a label that stops the conversation, “Oh, so-and-so’s got Asperger’s . . .” or “She does that because she has autism,” as if that can explain everything about a person. It’s never that simple. I didn’t want Max to be defined, or worse, dismissed.

This is your third novel. How was the experience of writing this book different from the others?

This was the first time I have ever written in the first person, and so the beginning was exceedingly difficult. Prior to writing this book, I thought that writing in the first person was foolishly limiting and wondered why any author would make such a choice. But when I sat down to write *Memoirs of an Imaginary Friend*, I realized it wasn’t me who was speaking. It was Budo. So Budo would have to tell the story. But it wasn’t easy.

Eventually I found myself enjoying the first-person narration, as it forced me to be more concise than I normally am. And once I found Budo’s voice and understood Max, writing the story became fun.

Do you write with an outline or with the end of the story in sight?

I don’t know the plot of any of my stories before I begin writing. Instead I find a character and a place to begin and start tapping keys. While a story eventually emerges, it’s hard for me to take any credit since so many parts of my stories reveal themselves to me through the process of writing. I never know where a story will take me, so as new and interesting imaginary friends presented themselves to Budo, I found myself meeting them for the first time as well.

And as I wrote, I came to understand that this was more than a book about a boy and his imaginary friend. There is an initially unintended existential aspect of the book that appealed to me a great deal. Having survived two near-death experiences as well as robbery at gunpoint, I am keenly aware of the potential for death and for nonexistence in everyday life. And as I wrote the book, I found some of my omnipresent fear and sadness over the prospect of death leaking into the story. It added an unexpected depth to the story that I was able to later tease out in greater detail.

Who are your first readers?

I’m lucky to have a trio of strong women who read my work. My wife is first, my agent second, and my editor third. My editor says she’s not used to third place and keeps lobbying to move up the chain, but this is based on seniority, so that’s just the way it is.

Why did you give the book an epilogue?

When I finished the book, it had no epilogue. I went to bed thinking that my story was finished, but when I awoke the next morning, those nine sentences were in my mind, almost exactly as they appear on the page today. I’m glad I included them. I get a lot of correspondence from readers commenting on the epilogue and what it means to them.



An Original Essay by the Author

“All Writers Start Out as Book Lovers”

My love for reading began in kindergarten, with a basal reader titled *Sun Up*. I can still remember the first page:

The sun was up. Bing was up. Sandy was up. Bing and Sandy was up.

(Apparently the author cared more about Bing and Sandy than correct grammar.)

When I arrived home from school on that first day, I removed the yellow and orange book from my backpack. My brother and sister crowded around me, anxious to see what I had brought home. I read the title aloud.

“*Sun Up.*”

My mom was so proud. At least my sister says she was. I was too focused on the book to notice. My sister says that she was proud, too. Reading seemed like magic to her.

I opened the book to the first page and attempted the first word: *the*. I sounded it out in my head: “ta-ha-eee.”

“The,” Mom corrected me.

The word came up again a few sentences later.

“Ta-ha-eeee,” I said.

Mom corrected me again. The word appeared several more times on those first few pages, and each time, I was unable to read it correctly. With each correction I could hear the frustration grow in my mother’s voice.

“Why don’t you take a break,” she suggested, her words strained.

It took me far too long to learn to read the word *the*,

but I can remember the moment when I sounded it out correctly for the first time. When the word made sense to me for the first time. It was a big moment in my then brief existence.

The next big moment came when I was ten years old and finally able to ride my bike to the town library and check out books. My parents had never taken me to the library, so I spent much of my childhood reading books that were not written for children. I read anything I could get my hands on, and the choices were limited. Starting with the top shelf of my parent’s bookshelf, I tackled our family’s half-set of encyclopedias, Funk and Wagnalls, A-K. I didn’t read every entry, but I read many of them—often dozens of times—and liked to show off what I knew. I remember, for example, our band leader being impressed when I was the only student to correctly identify the school’s first flugelhorn. I don’t remember his reaction when I asked why an instrument traditionally used in a jazz was being added to our marching band.

The depth of my A-K trivia is astounding.

Before long I had moved onto the second and third shelves, where I discovered my stepfather’s World War II nonfiction (a book detailing the Japanese invasion of Wake Island was especially good), George Carpozi’s account of the Son of Sam murders, and a smattering of novels including Peter Benchley’s *Jaws*, which I tore into four pieces and shared with my friends at school. We would later do the same for such hard-to-find books like *Helter Skelter* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

As a parent I can’t imagine letting my child read such dark and complex material, but that was how I grew up, and that was probably why my first bike ride to the public library was such a momentous occasion.

“I spent much of my childhood reading books that were not written for children.”

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*Behind the
Novel*

“It wasn’t until I reached high school that I fell in love with writing.”

And I remember it well. My hometown library consisted of a single, poorly lit room in the lower level of the town hall, and while it contained more books than I had ever seen, there were only about half a dozen aisles of books in all. Windows ran the length of one side of the room, but they were completely obscured by a thick hedgerow, ensuring that the only light came from the humming fluorescents overhead. The carpet was industrial, the smell was government brick, and the walls were gray and bare. A single round table filled the space opposite the stacks, and the six chairs surrounding it were the only seating available in the entire space. I would often sit at this table alongside small children and the elderly, the only two kinds of people (other than myself) who seemed to have a library card in my town. More often, however, the library was empty and always a little cold, even in the heat of August.

It was, in a word, beautiful.

I remember the first book I checked out of the library, but I can no longer recall the title, which is a shame because I’ve been trying to find it for years. It was a pre-dystopian science fiction story in which the tallest buildings in the world begin to liquefy, starting with the Sears Tower in Chicago. (It was the tallest building at the time.) The tip of the Sears Tower dissolves first, then, as it comes even in height with the second tallest building in the world, that building liquefies as well. And so on, and so on. Eventually all the buildings of the world liquefy at exactly the same rate, throwing the planet into terror and chaos.

If you guessed that this was the work of an alien race you’d be right. And if you guessed that this alien race felt obliged to ensure that mankind did not advance technologically beyond a point that is considered

safe, that they believed that by keeping buildings no taller than six stories the technological advancement of the human race will be curtailed, well . . . you were ahead of me.

Thirty years have passed since I read that book. While I’m sure that it’s out of print (it’s been impossible to find), I wish I knew what the title was. When my son and daughter are old enough, I’d love to read them this book and regale them in stories about my first trip to the public library.

When I moved on from the aliens and their urban renewal I read books by Stephen King, Agatha Christie, Douglas Adams, Ray Bradbury, and Frank Herbert. Mystery, science fiction, and horror were the books that I started with, often reading two or three in a week, but I soon discovered, thanks to a kindly librarian who sought to expand my literary boundaries, authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island* remains my favorite book to this day), Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe, and Mark Twain.

It wasn’t until I reached high school that I fell in love with writing, and only after discovering that writing allowed me to make girls laugh. But once the love for writing was real, I had an advantage, because I understood, better than many of my classmates, what made a great story. I had read many of the classics long before our teachers ever introduced them to us. I was the only kid in town to have read Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Stephen King’s *Cujo*, and Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*—all in the same month. By the time I was sixteen, I had read what seemed like every book in that dingy little library, and my background in literature was wide and deep. If all this sounds boastful, well, I guess it is. Like many children who grew

Behind the Novel

“All writers start out as book lovers...”

up to become writers, I felt myself something of an outsider and a misfit. Reading was the thing I loved to do. It was the thing that I could do well.

It was by reading that I absorbed what makes a great story. Still, I learned the hard way that knowing what makes a story and writing one are two very different things. That was okay. I’m sure that most writers can’t write in the beginning. For some of us, the road is long and hard. But we still have our books when our prose falls flat and our characters fail to come alive. All writers start out as book lovers, and that does not change, regardless of our success or lack thereof. We love to read, and then we love to write. And the books are always there for us.

Recommended Reading

***The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo**

This is a novel written for the YA audience, but honestly, it’s a book for all of us. It tells the story of a brave and noble mouse who struggles to be himself in a world that insists upon conformity.

***Close to Shore* by Michael Capuzzo**

Close to Shore is the nonfiction account of a series of shark attacks off the New Jersey shore in 1916 that later inspired Peter Benchley’s *Jaws*.

Capuzzo paints a brilliant portrait of this fascinating period of American history while simultaneously capturing the terror of a shark that could not be stopped.

***Ballistics* by Billy Collins**

For those who don’t like poetry, Billy Collins is for you. Collins’s poems read like brief, insightful, oftentimes hilarious essays that will entertain and inform any reader.

***Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn**

When you finish reading *Gone Girl*, you will want to talk to everyone you know about the book and begin jamming it into the hands of friends and family members. It’s an original thriller that will keep you guessing right up to the final pages of the book.

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***The Sparrow* by Mary Doria Russell**

When my friend told me that her favorite novel was about Jesuits in space, I had my doubts.

They proved to be unfounded. This is an unforgettable story about what happens when a man tries to do the right thing for the right reasons and causes unspeakable disaster.

***Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut**

This was the first novel I read by my favorite author, and it remains the funniest book I have ever read. I believe that this biting satire about a Midwestern car dealer's slow ride into insanity at the hands of his favorite author is Vonnegut's masterpiece.

***Defending Jacob* by William Landay**

This legal thriller about a district attorney who finds himself defending his teenage son from murder charges will keep you guessing all the way to the story's heart-stopping final page.

***I Feel Bad About My Neck* by Nora Ephron**

Most Americans know Nora Ephron for movies like *When Harry Met Sally* and *You've Got Mail*, but her essays are equally amusing and even more insightful. I've heard people say that she is the female version of David Sedaris, but as much as I adore Sedaris, I think Ephron is even better.

1. "I am not imaginary," says Budo. Do you believe him?
2. Max's mother wants desperately to understand what is wrong with Max, while his father wants desperately to believe that there is nothing wrong. Who do you side with?
3. Budo seems to watch a lot of television. How do his viewing habits shape his perception of the world?
4. Budo straddles many worlds: child and adult; real and imaginary. Could the same be said for other characters in this book?
5. Mrs. Patterson did a terrible thing. But is there any way in which her actions may have been beneficial to Max?
6. What does Budo fear most? Why does he think that Max's mom and dad are his biggest danger?
7. The author, Matthew Dicks, is an elementary school teacher. In what ways can you see the influence of this "day job" on his writing?
8. Did you have an imaginary friend as a child, and if so, which imaginary friend from the book most resembles your imaginary friend? If you didn't have an imaginary friend, do you wish you had one? Who from the book would you have chosen to be your imaginary friend?
9. What is your interpretation of the epilogue of the book?
10. Did you ever have a teacher as important to you as Mrs. Gosk is to Max and Budo? Who was your Mrs. Gosk?

11. Mrs. Gosk is an actual teacher in the school where Matthew Dicks also teaches. What do you think about the idea that the author used an actual person in the novel?
12. How did you feel about Mrs. Patterson? Did you see her as a villain? Did you feel empathy for her?
13. Excluding Budo, which of the imaginary friends in the book was your favorite and why?
14. Budo describes Max as the bravest person on the planet because he has to go out into the world every day being himself even though no one likes him. Do you agree?
15. If the book is adapted for film, how do you think the role of Budo should be cast? By an actor (and if so, whom?) or through some form of animation?

Matthew Dicks is the author of two other novels, *Something Missing* and *Unexpectedly, Milo*, as well as the rock opera *The Clowns*. When he is not hunched over a computer screen, he fills his days as an elementary school teacher. He is a former West Hartford Teacher of the Year and a three-time Moth StorySLAM champion. Matthew is married to friend and fellow teacher, Elysha, and they have a daughter named Clara and a son named Charlie. Matthew grew up in the small town of Blackstone, Massachusetts, where he spent his time milking cows, mucking stalls, and managing his local McDonald's restaurant. Visit www.matthewdicks.com to learn more.



Credit: Holly M. Williams