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R. A. Nelson

TEACH ME

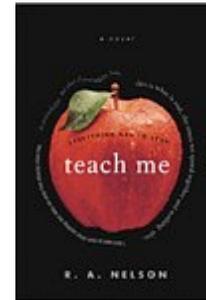
R. A. Nelson

**BIO**

R. A. Nelson lives in Madison, Alabama. TEACH ME was awarded the Dona Vaughn SCBWI Work-in-Progress grant.

**INTERVIEW****October 18, 2005**

Teenreads.com contributing writer Alexis Burling interviewed R. A. Nelson about the author's controversial debut novel **TEACH ME**, in which its 18-year-old protagonist is involved in an affair with her high school teacher. Nelson refused to portray the characters' relationship as a black-and-white situation. Initially hesitant to write about such a questionable but socially relevant topic, the author shares surprise and gratitude over the book's positive reception.



**Teenreads.com: What makes TEACH ME so unique is that both Nine and Mr. Mann are seen as whole (albeit extremely complex) people, each with their own agenda. You have done a superb job in pointing out the strengths as well as the weaknesses in both of their personalities, and have miraculously avoided pointing the "blame finger" solely at either party. How did you manage to do this and why did you choose this objective route, rather than writing a book with a clear-cut right-and-wrong message?**

**R. A. Nelson:** Thanks. I think it's harder to blame people and find fault when you like them, even if what they are doing is inappropriate and wrong. By playing out the love story between these two, I think it gives readers a chance to get to know the characters well and get caught up in the romance rather than look to find fault. The more we examine them, the more human they become. I had originally decided to make the love story take up only one short chapter and focus instead on the aftermath of the affair. But I ended up expanding it to 100 pages showing Nine and Mr. Mann in all kinds of situations, letting you

know they are basically good people who got caught up in something they had great difficulty controlling.

**TRC: Throughout Nine's affair with Mr. Mann, she keeps her thoughts and feelings hidden from her family and her best friend Schuyler. As her behavior grows increasingly disturbed and starts to affect her future and her health, her parents seem at a loss for what to do and how to help her. Do you think this is a common occurrence in today's world? How can parents stay more in touch with their children to prevent something like this from happening?**

**RAN:** As scary as it sounds, I think kids keep a lot of things from their parents. How to prevent something like this from happening is a tough question. I think Nine's downfall comes from the fact that she isn't well-rounded enough. She isn't very social and is too dependent on her focus and scholastic strengths to carry her through, when really she needs a more well-rounded "people" education. Maybe this is a cautionary tale about why we should never get too isolated or hell-bent on one particular field of study, and to remember that people matter more than anything else. Nine's wonderful mind gives her a false sense of security and leaves her particularly vulnerable to charging into a situation she knows very little about.

**TRC: When Nine and Mr. Mann eventually have sex, Nine is 18 and therefore a legal, consenting adult. Had you always planned to have this happen then or did you add that detail in order to avoid potential backlash from critics? How do you think the book would have been different if she was underage?**

**RAN:** In the beginning, I didn't worry about her age; I knew the story was going to be controversial from the start. Then well into the process, my agent suggested that I might want to have Nine turn 18 before the affair is actually consummated. This way, the story can focus instead on the characters and all the twists and turns of the plot, rather than Mr. Mann's sticky legal situation --- which would have been inevitable if Nine were younger.

**TRC: Are the characters of Nine and Mr. Mann based on anyone in particular? If not, where did the idea of these characters and their respective stories originate?**

**RAN:** Neither of the characters is based on anybody from real life...unless you count me. My father was a NASA engineer on the Apollo Moon program, and big chunks of Nine's personality come from my own. Mr. Mann's fascination with poetry and weird teaching methods are mine as well.

Nine walked up out of the blue one day when I had just finished writing about 600 pages in a single year on three books that I will probably never finish. I was tired and I took a couple of

months off, and suddenly there she was, creeping around in her suburban backyard with her telescope. I usually start with a story idea and work from there, but this time I began with a fascinating character and then slowly uncovered her story. Mr. Mann was more an invention than an inspiration --- I wanted to depict a teacher who was mysterious, romantic, exciting, but somehow disconnected from people his own age. It was especially important to me that he would not be painted as a cardboard villain, a cad or a predator. I wanted him to be fully fleshed and real --- a fallible, yet interesting and relatively sympathetic character.

**TRC: TEACH ME is written from the point-of-view of a 17-year-old/18-year-old girl. Did you find writing in a young, female voice to be difficult?**

**RAN:** Somebody once said, "Writers are failed actors," and I tend to believe this. When I'm writing, I completely inhabit the character and see the world through her eyes. I can't imagine writing any other way. I witness the story in front of me as I'm walking around inside of it, experiencing it as it unfolds, so that what I type almost seems like "reporting" on something real that I'm observing. From my way of thinking, writing from a young girl's perspective is probably identical to an actor taking on a part that is very different from his own reality. Once you begin to "think" with the character's mind, it becomes more a process of letting go, of just getting out of your own way and describing what you see and feel as things happen.

Usually this requires a little "throat-clearing," sometimes several thousand words of it, to get to this point of "letting go." I have a quote next to my desk from Franz Kafka that I found on a calendar a few years ago: "From a certain point onward, there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached." I love that kind of thinking.

**TRC: Since your novel's publication in September, it has been highlighted repeatedly by the press and has amassed quite a following in the education/library community. Given the controversial nature of the book, does this attention surprise you? Did you expect TEACH ME to create such a stir when you were writing it?**

**RAN:** The response from teachers and librarians has been really gratifying. They have rallied to my side several times when my book was attacked by people who hadn't read it, but simply denounced it because of its subject matter. Early on it was suggested that libraries might not carry my book, but they seem to really be picking it up. It has been nominated for Best Book of the Year by the ALA.

I started with the character of Nine, and then my friend Kathleen O'Dell helped me come up with the idea that Nine was sleeping

with her teacher. At the time, I was horrified...I wasn't sure I should write a story about a subject like that, but Kathy and others convinced me to go ahead with it. I was aware that it would rile some critics who wouldn't be too happy with the subject matter, but I knew that if I did it with sensitivity and care, it could be an important book. I'm finding that this phenomenon is incredibly common --- you can't imagine how many people have approached me since TEACH ME came out to relate a story from high school about teachers having affairs with students. A lot of them even got married. One man told me he was propositioned by one of his female students 35 years ago! So apparently it's not a new phenomenon, either.

**TRC: Did you ever worry that TEACH ME would offend potential readers, parents, or educators? And if so, what were some of the measures you took to keep that from happening?**

**RAN:** I didn't really worry about this as I was writing the book. Once I had committed to carrying it through, I dropped all concerns about the fallout and concentrated instead on writing the best story I could write. I knew that I wouldn't turn out a cheap, sensationalistic book --- that just isn't the way I work. I also knew that if it was handled with sensitivity and intelligence, it had a good shot at transcending the knee-jerk reaction to its subject. My editor, Liesa Abrams, and I set very high standards for ourselves with this book.

**TRC: In your mind, what are the most prominent lessons to learn from reading TEACH ME?**

**RAN:** Not to isolate yourself from the important people around you, family and friends. Not to trust SO much in your own intelligence that you miss picking up on the valuable wisdom and experience of others. Don't fall into the trap of reverse snobbery.

**TRC: In the Acknowledgments, you write, "Hey, Ms. Gonzalez, I did it!" Was Ms. Gonzalez a teacher of yours? What role did she play in your life? In your writing?**

**RAN:** Ms. Gonzalez was a beloved English teacher of mine in the 8th and 9th grades at a small country school in Madison, Alabama. I would love to see her again. She made us read GREAT EXPECTATIONS, SILAS MARNER, Shakespeare, the poetry of Robert Frost, and works by many other incredible writers (mostly dead white guys, except for George Eliot, but what can I say, this was 1970s Alabama). I will never forget her encouragement --- like all good teachers, she made an imprint on my life that will last forever. I would dearly love to give her an autographed copy of TEACH ME, but I can't find her. I Googled like crazy, to no avail. Sad to say, I can't even remember her first name. Nancy, perhaps? The last time I ever saw her, I had moved into town and was raising Cain with three

girls at the local Baskin Robbins. I'll never forget the ghastly look of disappointment that came over Ms. Gonzalez's face when she saw me. I want to show her that her former Teacher's Pet made good after all. (She also adored my hair.)

**TRC: Are there other books that you can recommend for teen readers, either those that you enjoyed when you were their age or those that inspired you to write your first book?**

**RAN:** I read a lot of science fiction when I was a teen. ANYTHING by Philip K. Dick (he wrote the books that *Blade Runner* and *Minority Report* were based on) and Cyril Kornbluth. I also really loved Mark Twain, especially THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN, which is hilarious and a very brave book for its time.

Current writers and titles I like are people like Scott Westerfeld (PEEPS, UGLIES, SO YESTERDAY), Justine Larbalestier (MAGIC OR MADNESS), Holly Black (TITHE, VALIANT), Carolyn Coman (WHAT JAMIE SAW), Libba Bray (A GREAT AND TERRIBLE BEAUTY, REBEL ANGELS), Ann Brashares (SISTERHOOD OF THE TRAVELING PANTS), to name just a few.

**TRC: If TEACH ME is made into a movie, who would you cast to play Nine? Mr. Mann?**

**RAN:** I have always joked around that Johnny Depp would make a great Mr. Mann, though he's actually older than the teacher. It would be fun to see what he could do with the part. For the character of Nine, several people have suggested Amber Tamblyn, who played Tibby in the movie version of THE SISTERHOOD OF THE TRAVELING PANTS. I would probably be miserable at picking characters for my book, so I will leave that to the pros.

**TRC: Do you have children of your own? If so, did they read any of the book's drafts prior to its publication?**

**RAN:** We have four kids, all boys. They STILL haven't read TEACH ME. I'm sure they will at some point in time, but right now they are too busy with soccer, Worlds of Warcraft, and reading books like ELDEST by Christopher Paolini or the *Cirque Du Freak* series. Boys will be boys, I guess...

**TRC: Given such a promising debut, what's next for you?**

**RAN:** My next book is a tightly guarded state secret --- my editors at Razorbill, Liesa Abrams and Eloise Flood, have vowed to dangle me from the Empire State Building over a shark tank if I divulge the plot. But I can say this: it is about a girl who suffered a horrific tragedy at a very young age, and is now a teenager just trying to grow up sane and normal like everyone

else. But something is about to enter her life that will bring up the tragedy all over again, and she begins to question her own sanity until a very strange boy comes along to take her on a frightening little quest.

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