

Adam Canfield, Watch Your Back!
BY MICHAEL WINERIP

ABOUT THE BOOK

ADAM CANFIELD AND HIS FRIEND JENNIFER ARE coeditors of the *Slash*, Harris Elementary/Middle School's award-winning newspaper. In *Adam Canfield of the Slash*, they became famous when they exposed their principal, Mrs. Marris, for misuse of school funds. Now, a month later, they have an acting principal who believes in the first amendment, and the young investigative reporters are still in search of news that could rock the school and community. When Adam is mugged by a group of high-school bullies, he struggles to keep a low profile, but Jennifer thinks the incident is newsworthy. She proposes that the *Slash* sponsor a school-wide bully survey. Students embrace the chance to name the top ten bullies in the school, but Adam is nervous. He is more interested in uncovering a science fair sham and in getting to the root of a problem with the renaming of a street in Tremble County for Martin Luther King Jr.

Adam, Jennifer, and Phoebe, the cub reporter, once again come face-to-face with issues that are almost too large for them. Along the way, they encounter a few adult bullies, such as Mrs. Boland, a rich lady who tries to control the town, and Mr. Devillio, a teacher who shows favoritism to science fair projects that are largely the work of over-involved parents. What happens with the bully survey? How does Adam expose Mr. Devillio? Why does Mrs. Boland try to blackmail the young reporters? Readers will gravitate toward these bright, humorous young characters who have a knack for nailing "crooked" adults.

"People assumed that because he did investigations, he liked to pick fights." (p. 22)



DISCUSSION POINTS

Before reading:

Discuss the behaviors that characterize bullies. Have readers write a journal entry about a time when they have been bullied or witnessed an act of bullying. Ask for volunteers to read their writing aloud. Talk about ways of dealing with minor cases of bullying.

While reading:

1. When Adam tells his mother that an older kid hit him, his mother responds, "You've been mugged." Discuss the difference between "being hit" and being "mugged." Why is Adam reluctant to answer questions about the "mugging"?
2. Describe Adam's parents. Debate whether or not they might be labeled overprotective parents. Why do they think Adam needs a shrink?
3. It is obvious that the boys who hit Adam and stole his money are bullies. Name the adult bullies in the story. At what point does Adam realize that Mrs. Boland is a bully? How does Mr. Devillio bully his students?
4. Mrs. Quigley, the acting principal, feels that bullying is a problem at Harris Elementary/Middle School and approves of the bully survey that Jennifer wants to conduct. Why is Adam so nervous about the survey? Is his instinct correct?
5. Why does Adam feel "outmaneuvered" at school and at home? How does interviewing Erik Forrest, a world-famous war reporter, energize Adam and make him more focused? Discuss how Adam "outmaneuvers" everyone in the end.
6. Shadow, a special education student and a resident of the Willows, helps Adam and Jennifer with the bully survey. At what point does Adam realize that Shadow really does live his life in the shadows? How does Adam give Shadow a sense of importance? Why does Adam feel that the judge should know about Shadow and his brother? How does Shadow help Adam appreciate his own parents more?
7. Discuss the meaning of trust. What makes Adam realize that Mr. Devillio, Dr. Bleepin, and Mrs. Boland aren't trustworthy? Adam says that adults have "secret personalities that they hide under their public jolly selves" (p. 165). Contrast the public and private personalities of each of these characters. Why does Mrs. Willard trust Adam so much? How does she convince Reverend Shorty that Adam and the staff of the *Slash* are trustworthy? Mrs. Quigley is quite the opposite of Mrs. Marris, the past principal of Harris Elementary/Middle. How does Mrs. Quigley gain the trust of her students? Why does she think it is important that the *Slash* reporters learn from their mistakes? How does this create an atmosphere of trust?
8. Discuss the different kinds of prejudices that exist at Harris Elementary/Middle and in Tremble County. How does the bully survey conducted by the editors of the *Slash* expose such prejudices? Discuss how the science fair reveals prejudices against students who don't perform well in school. How does Mrs. Boland display her prejudices against the residents of the Willows? Explain why she feels that renaming a street for Martin Luther King Jr. makes her actions acceptable. Discuss the opinions of Reverend Shorty and Mrs. Willard on this issue. What do Adam, Jennifer, and Phoebe learn from them?

"Be careful. You upset powerful people like the Bolands, they can squeeze you hard. They don't forget." (p. 75)



9. What does Jennifer mean when she accuses Adam of “blood lust for sweet revenge” (p. 272)?
10. How does Mrs. Quigley demonstrate her belief in the first amendment? She promises to protect the young reporters once they have agreed on a plan. Why does she feel that they need protecting? What does she teach the *Slash* reporters about compromise?

POST-READING ACTIVITY

Ask a school district official, a law enforcement officer, or someone from a juvenile detention facility to speak about local problems dealing with bullies. Have them address the differences between a felony, an assault, and a robbery.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL WINERIP

- Q.** Bullying seems to be a major problem in schools today. Do you think bullying has increased? What advice do you offer kids in dealing with bullies?
- A.** I wouldn't guess that bullying has increased. My gut feeling is that things like this stay the same over time, although adults today are probably more aware and more inclined to do something about it than when I was a kid—which is a good thing. Many schools have instituted programs to educate kids about the harms of bullying and how to respond, which I also think is very healthy. In terms of advice to kids about bullying, there is a wide range of bullying, from mildly annoying to dangerous and even life-threatening, and the appropriate response depends on the level of bullying.

“Writing the truth about people is too hard. Everyone hates you.” (p. 293)

In our family, with four children, we've seen the whole range and tried to respond accordingly. I have two examples from opposite ends of the bully spectrum, both of which come up in *Adam Canfield, Watch Your Back!* When my oldest, Ben, was in third grade, a “friend” of his would push his face against the school-bus window. Ben told me about it, and I felt that it was something he should take care of himself, something I as a parent did not need to be involved with. I told him that if it were me, I'd push the kid back, then look him in the eye and tell him never to do that again. Ben told me that he was afraid if he hit the kid, he'd get in trouble, and I promised him that I would talk to school officials and stand behind him if that happened. He chose not to hit the kid back. That was his decision. Somehow it worked out; they were still friends through high school. The opposite, dangerous end of the spectrum is the basis for the first chapter of *Adam Canfield, Watch Your Back!* Like Adam, Ben was mugged for his shoveling money when he was in middle school. And we talked about whether it would be better or worse to call the police. Would he face worse retribution if we pursued this? And I, as the parent, decided that I would call the police, that this was a criminal act and that we couldn't be held hostage to fear in our own town. We then helped the police to find one of the kids and supported the prosecution. Ben did not face retribution, and by pursuing it, we put these kids on notice that we would not quietly let ourselves be bullied. It was also important for another reason. Months later the ringleader of the muggers beat up another kid in our town, and because we had reported him, he had a criminal record and got a stiff sentence as a repeat offender.



- Q.** Many schools have adopted zero-tolerance policies as a means of dealing with bullying in schools. Do you think that zero tolerance is really the answer? Will you comment on the importance of using story to help kids understand issues of bullying?
- A.** As I try to get across in *Adam Canfield, Watch Your Back!*, zero tolerance can be a dangerous policy. Rather, I think that grown-ups, with the help of kids, ought to be able to figure out appropriate punishments on a case-by-case basis, as Adam and the acting principal, Mrs. Quigley, do. And we must remember that one person's hero can be another's bully, as Adam and Jennifer come to understand. Adam himself gets three votes as a top ten bully, one of which he is pretty sure came from the world's greatest third-grade reporter, Phoebe. I've also seen this in my own four children, all good kids. There have been times when I felt that every one of them has been guilty of bullying a sibling or a more vulnerable kid, and I have called them on it.

"A brave principal was a school newspaper's best friend." (p. 311)

I also think that "story" and stories can play an important role in helping with bullying issues. For kids, an ethical issue can seem very abstract, and the way to make them understand is to give them situations—stories—that they can see themselves in and empathize with. I try to do this throughout the Adam Canfield books, presenting brain-tickler conundrums where the characters must puzzle out what is the honorable choice to make.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

MICHAEL WINERIP has spent more than thirty years as a reporter and four years as the education columnist for the *New York Times*. Armed with a collection of colorful stories and some distinct opinions regarding today's educational system, Michael Winerip wrote his debut book for young readers, *Adam Canfield of the Slash*, which has now been followed by the sequel, *Adam Canfield, Watch Your Back!*

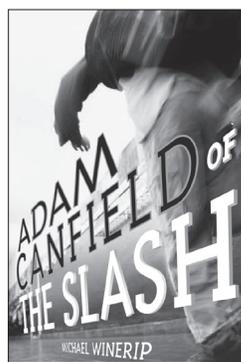
He has approached these books with a great appreciation for the nature of children. "Kids are still growing into the people they will become. They're more intellectually interesting than adults," he says. "As a reporter, I've learned that there are only two groups of people who will tell you the truth. One is the elderly, and the other is kids. They don't have that defensive shell. They'll either tell you the truth or be blatantly dishonest, which is good."

Michael Winerip lives in New York with his wife and four children. He writes a parenting column for the *New York Times* and is working on the third Adam Canfield story.

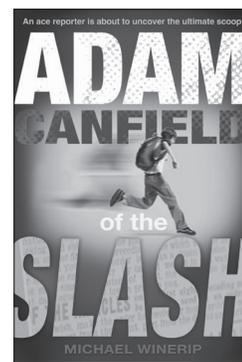
Also by Michael Winerip

Adam Canfield of the Slash

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