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Truant Teaching:

A Conversation with Isamu Fukui

Interviewer's note: *On September 24, 2009, in Columbia, South Carolina, I sat down with Isamu Fukui and talked about his writing, his motivations, and his perspective on YA lit.*

TAR: *This summer you completed the manuscript for the final volume of the Truancy series. Can you tell me about Truancy City?*

IF: *Truancy City* takes place a year after *Truancy*. Although the Educators still control a sizeable chunk in the center, the Truancy controls most of the City. Tack is now, obviously, the leader of the Truancy. We're not seeing things from his perspective anymore, though; we see things through the eyes of his enemy. What I really love about *Truancy City* is the perspective shift. *Truancy* was written from a Truant's perspective. *Truancy Origins* was written from a neutral perspective. *Truancy City* is written from the perspective of the Student Militia. A good chunk of the book covers the war between the Militia and the Truancy from the perspective of Edward's successor, the new captain of the Student Militia.

TAR: *Do you think your readers are ready for that switch? Many of your high school fans are attracted to the Truancy's rebellion against school, right?*

IF: Umasi, who is a familiar character, is a kind of bridge [for readers] because he is struggling against both sides. Something very interesting happens to Umasi in *Truancy City*. . . . And not everyone in the

Student Militia is fighting to save school. The protagonist, Cross, Edward's successor and the leader of the Militia, is not one of what I call the True Believers. I always thought of Cross as the ultimate, or rather, *model* student because he's so tractable. He was Edward's second-in-command because he was so good at following orders. He didn't come to that post by demonstrating ingenuity. Thanks not just to the Educators' education, but also to Edward's, he doesn't think for himself. So [in *Truancy City*], you're not really seeing the story through the eyes of someone who thinks school is wonderful, but more from the perspective of someone who doesn't think for himself.

TAR: *What do the True Believers stand for? Are they capable of independent critical thought?*

IF: The Student Militia is not as ideological as the Truancy. Some [members] are just horrified by the violence and want to protect their families and friends. Others are in it for themselves; they want the instant graduation that comes with [joining the Militia]. But you also have the True Believers, who genuinely want to prove that they're not Truants and that the Truants don't speak for them. I felt that one of the weak parts of *Truancy* was that I didn't explore the Student Militia—you never get to see what's going on in their heads, you just see them as sell-outs. *Truancy City* addresses this.

TAR: *It seems that you are interested in exploring your fictional creations in very three-dimensional ways.*

IF: Yes, especially in a book like *Truancy*, where conflict is the central theme. If you ground [the narrative] in one perspective permanently, I don't think you do justice to either the characters or the story. I'm very mindful of the fact that in every conflict, there's always two sides. Each side will always believe that they are correct. I find that fascinating.

TAR: *You've made clear in previous interviews that you identify strongly with the Truants' frustrations with school and with their desire to rebel against "the system." How have you approached the process of understanding how the Student Militia thinks?*

IF: During my senior year at Stuyvesant, there was a sort of rogue student organization called "Stuy-watch." They wanted some freedoms returned [to them] that the students had lost, so they worked to organize and rally the students. Something I found really interesting and fascinating is that an alternative group, "watch-Stuy" popped up. "Watch-Stuy" was infuriated that this group ["Stuy-watch"] presumed to talk for all students. I expanded from there to create the perspective of the Student Militia.

TAR: *Both of the published Truancy books offer a strong critique of the way schools as an institution infantilize teenagers. Throughout the novels, though, the narrator refers to teenage characters as "children." Obviously, this creates reader sympathy for teenagers' plight at the hands of Educators and Enforcers. But the language choice doesn't always sit well with the books' larger critique. Can you explain your thinking behind referring to the characters as "children"?*

IF: Other people have asked me that, too. I wanted to redefine the word, to shatter expectations of what you think of as a "child." When you think of "child," you think of something immature. But you could show a world where in fact the opposite is true, where children are the only ones who understand.

TAR: *That's interesting! Beverly Lyon Clark (Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)*

discusses the notion of children (and hence their literature) being associated with "immaturity" during the course of the twentieth century. Your books are published by Tor Teen and marketed as children's, or rather Young Adult, literature. What do you think of that?

IF: I've had a lot of arguments about labels. There's no science in my fiction, so why call it "science fiction"? All these labels are ultimately for marketing purposes.

TAR: *Do you think there's an advantage to having a book for teens actually authored by a teen?*

IF: Well, people can't accuse you of being out of touch, even though people have, anyway. I believe that what age you are doesn't matter one way or another. Some people are really good at writing from perspectives other than their own (straight to gay, women to men, etc.). I don't think who you are in reality says anything about your ability to write anything. Really, if you're approaching a book [based on] the author first, I think you're doing wrong.

TAR: *Did you read YA literature in high school?*

IF: I just read books that I thought were interesting: the Artemis Fowl series, Anamorphs series, and when I was younger, the Redwall Series—that was the first novel I read, actually, in kindergarten.

TAR: *Your books are also very cinematic . . .*

IF: Yes, nothing has happened on that front yet. I would love to see it [adapted into a movie]!

TAR: *Were video games also an influence for you? Are you a gamer?*

IF: I'm an avid gamer. You name it, I've probably heard of it if I haven't played it. I think videogames are a very interesting storytelling medium. Some people knock it because it's interactive, but that has strengths. The choices you make in the game really affect your entire experience. One of the important themes I like to explore is the idea that

Portrait of the Author as a Young Man

Isamu Fukui, the 19-year-old author of *Truancy* (2008), *Truancy Origins* (2009), and the forthcoming *Truancy City* (all Tor Teen), is many things: a native New Yorker, a child of immigrants, an NYU student, an avid video-gamer, and an author, both published and aspiring.

In 2004, after a miserable middle school experience during which he was beaten up by students and not infrequently removed from class by teachers, Fukui began high school at Stuyvesant—the elite New York City exam admissions school—hopeful that things would improve. They didn't. Or at least, not enough. As Fukui has explained, he discovered that his problem was less with an individual school than it was with the institutional nature of public schooling itself. Despite his considerable academic gifts and intellectual curiosity, Fukui neither enjoyed nor excelled in the classroom. Rejecting his teachers' assertions that certain books (*Robinson Crusoe*) or subjects (pre-calculus) were important, Fukui rebelled against the monotony of homework assignments, freedom-restricting rules, and a daily routine that stifled creativity and thwarted individuality.

During class, Fukui began scribbling notes in the margins of homework assignments as he tuned out “boring” lectures and class discussions. Whenever a teacher said or did something that particularly “ticked him off”—announcing, for example, that students must turn in their test papers immediately, instead of at the end of class as expected—Fukui meticulously recorded the event. These field notes became the germs of *Truancy*, his 429-page debut novel about a group of Truants engaged in guerilla warfare to overthrow the Educators, men who control both the schools and the City in a dystopian world resembling contemporary Manhattan. The interactions between teachers and students depicted in the novel, Fukui readily admits, are largely based on his own experiences. (The water-torture scene? Written, Fukui reported, “after a particularly miserable day at school.”)

Truancy was composed at break-neck speed. During the summer following his freshman year in high school, Fukui wrote a chapter a day on his brother's laptop computer, completing the manuscript in a month. “Back then I had no idea where I was going,” Fukui told me. But he found the writing process both

enjoyable and empowering. In the fictional world he created, this fifteen-year-old author could speak out about the hypocrisies he saw in the American school system: federally mandated testing policies that ensured little curricular space for higher-order thinking or creative development; Zero Tolerance policies that increased rather than diminished school violence and made students feel like prisoners in their own schools. Most of all, he had an opportunity to process the anger and frustrations he felt toward both teachers and tyrannical peers.

As Fukui typed away his summer vacation, refusing meals and sleeping erratically, his parents started to wonder what so engrossed him; the next thing Fukui knew, he discovered his father hastily concealing the laptop containing his manuscript. Nobu Fukui, a prominent New York artist, recognized the book's potential and, without his son's knowledge, passed it on to a friend with a literary agent. The teenage Fukui began working with an editor and the book sold, first in Europe, then in the States. By his senior year of high school, Fukui was not only conducting interviews for major news outlets, but had also earned enough through advances and foreign royalties to pay his way through college. After he got in, that was.

Like Nobu, Fukui's father, I first discovered *Truancy* on a laptop. Two years ago, shortly after I joined the English Department at the University of South Carolina, I began constructing a syllabus for the Adolescent Literature course I was assigned to teach. Having settled on a selection of classic Young Adult texts for the first unit, I began researching recently-released adolescent books to complement these. I was seeking books that startled, novels that through their subject, language, and form asked penetrating questions about what it meant to be human—and more specifically, an adolescent—in today's world.

I came across Fukui's NPR interviews in a Google search and was astonished by the author's ability to articulate his frustrations with the public school system in a manner that forced adults to take him seriously. I immediately thought of S. E. Hinton. In 1967, at the age of seventeen, she had published *The Outsiders*, a novel now widely credited as launching the YA genre. Was Fukui starting a similar revolution, I wondered? I immediately ordered a copy of his book.

When *Truancy* arrived in the mail, I read it straight through. I soon found myself talking about the

novel to everyone I came in contact with: my neighbor, who taught middle school science; my mother, a retired kindergarten teacher; my younger cousin, a disaffected high school student; my colleagues, professors, and graduate students of English, history, and education. Several ordered copies for themselves, and the conversation continued.

Could I teach this book, I wondered? What would my Carolina students—many preparing to be middle or high school teachers and deeply committed to public education—think of Fukui’s message? Would they be offended by his depiction of sadistic teachers? Horrified by the violence students commit in the story? I had laughed out loud at Fukui’s depiction of the over-eager student of the New York City prep school variety; would my South Carolina students be able to relate to the landscape—both physical and emotional—that the New York teen had captured?

As I pondered, I began searching back issues of the *New York Times* in an attempt to contextualize Fukui’s critique and the urban world in which he was raised. How was this young author affected by Columbine? By 9/11, the Patriot Act, and the war in Afghanistan? By public debates about the appropriateness of torture as a political weapon? How had Fukui’s educational experiences been colored by No Child Left Behind? Did he know about the United Nations’ increased attention to the Rights of the Child? Had he studied the student protest movements of the 1960s?

Adolescent angst might be universal, student frustration with school timeless, but this novel, it seemed to me, spoke poignantly to our contemporary moment.

As I read, I marveled at the “modernity” of Fukui’s novel—the way multicultural characters were a given, girls fought alongside boys in hand-to-hand combat, and cinematic forms merged with ceramic swords that harkened back to medieval codes of knighthood. The book reads like a videogame, even as the carefully crafted language of certain passages make clear that the young author is an aspiring intellectual, a teenager who values ideas and isn’t afraid to ask the big questions.

I decided to teach the book. After I read *Truancy* with my Adolescent Literature class in the fall of 2008, I discovered students talking about the novel every time I walked into the classroom. This year, I invited Isamu Fukui to campus. As my students are quick to point out, there are both gains and losses when a novel is the product of a fifteen-year-old’s imagination and sixteen-year-old’s editing skills. But it is impossible not to recognize Fukui’s tremendous accomplishment. And his audacity. We have heard innumerable critiques of No Child Left Behind and Zero Tolerance over the past few years. Fukui, however, has done something about it. Too young to vote, too level-headed to drop out of school, he wrote a book that forces adults to sit up and listen.

your enemy might view you completely differently than you expect. That realization I actually got from a videogame (“Tales of Phantasia”) when I was very young.

TAR: *Have you tried writing video games?*

IF: That’s how I started writing—fanfiction. It levels the playing field because no one knows how old you are. So if they tell you something is good, you know it’s good.

TAR: *One of the really exciting aspects of Truancy is its critique of No Child Left Behind, Zero Tolerance, and the culture of bullying (both among students and between teachers and students) in high schools.*

If you had the power to reform the American school system, where would you start?

IF: First of all, I can imagine a system that works. I think our colleges work very well. Our higher education institutions are the best in the world. But American high schools are really a joke. My experience in college has been so much, much better than high school. Some of it is actually very simple. In college, you’re treated as an adult, a young adult, but an adult. People treat you with respect. There’s mutual respect going on. In high school, teachers don’t respect students and students don’t respect teachers. Maybe it’s cultural, or societal. Kids are treated as if it’s natural that they are miscreants, so of course, they’re going to behave that way.

TAR: *You're now a sophomore at NYU, double majoring in English and Political Science. How do you think your studies and experience in college will affect the issues you want to explore in your writing?*

IF: I set a goal for myself to finish the Truancy series while still a teenager. If I had waited until I was out [of high school], I would have never been able to do it. The urgency isn't there anymore. Even after spending a year or two out of high school, you forget the bad things. I did sort of forget how I was treated, but [my high school English teacher invited me back to Stuyvesant to speak]. The security guards didn't realize I wasn't a student. I had my headphones on when I walked in and the woman at the front [desk] was screeching at me, "Take your headphones off!" That was really shocking because no one is that rude to you out in the real world. She was *screeching!*

TAR: *Truancy City is now with your editor. What's next?*

IF: I'm tossing around several ideas. [One] is a sort of ghost story but with a twist that the ghosts can't survive without taking over a host; they have to possess someone. Either they have to stick in the darkness or inhabit a human body. My idea is that the main character would be a woman who would not really be possessed, but who would have a symbiotic relationship with a ghost; they share control, and they hunt bad ghosts.

Sara L. Schwebel is an assistant professor of English at the University of South Carolina, where she teaches courses in Children's, Adolescent, and American Literature. A former middle school teacher (American History and English), she is coauthor of The Student Teacher's Handbook, 4th edition. Sara is currently completing a book manuscript that examines the most widely taught historical novels in today's middle schools.

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