



Readers' Guide



The Silent Summer of Kyle McGinley

a novel

by Jan Andrews

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When no one listens, what's the point of talking?

Kyle McGinley doesn't say a word. Fed up with being shuttled from one foster care home to another, he has stopped speaking. But at the home of Scott and Jill Wardman, with the help of a crow, a swamp, and an excess of black paint, he begins to think that maybe, just maybe, life could be better.

As long as his frigging dad doesn't mess things up.

"...Silent Summer ... is utterly gorgeous! In a well-paced, beautifully spare prose, Andrews charts the journey of a boy faced with the most difficult task of his life: making friends with a darkly mysterious, frightened and unhappy stranger: himself."

— Tim Wynne-Jones, author of *Blink & Caution*

"From the moment we first meet Kyle, a ward of the state, we care deeply about this abused and silent boy. The Silent Summer of Kyle McGinley is an unsentimental celebration of courage, kindness and hard-won hope. Jan Andrews is at the top of her game."

— Sarah Ellis, author of *Odd Man Out*

From the author...

Dear Reader:

The Silent Summer of Kyle McGinley is full of surprises. It seems only right to tell you that, surprising as they may be to you, they were also surprising to me. I did not expect Kyle to find an imaginary character popping up in his head, I did not expect him to take up painting. I just knew he was in foster care and I knew he was not going to speak. I think I also knew he was going to find some way to live as much as possible on his own for a while and I knew he would be involved with a crow that clucked. That's where the story started, in fact – probably close to forty years ago – with a crow that was owned by my next door neighbour and which did just that. Once I became a writer I knew I had to do something with her. She sat in my head and sat in my head, waiting to find the story she could take her place in in exactly the right way.

Kyle himself grew out of a number of influences. He is like my son who hated school from the day he first went there but who believed passionately that he would only make it all worse if he caused trouble; if he did not do his work well; if he alienated himself from other kids. He stuck to that from kindergarten onwards. His teachers never knew what a struggle it was for him. There is also the fact that, during the time when my own children were teenagers, I had three teenage foster children come into my life. It was through this I realized the complexity of what kids in care were facing, the difficulties that were with them every single day. I had enormous respect for the courage with which they held onto their own sense of identity – even though that frequently made things more of a challenge for me!

You will no doubt notice that at the beginning of the book, there are a lot of things Kyle has given up on. It is not simply that he has given up on speaking, he has given up on hoping that anything is going to get better in the foreseeable future. What he has not given up on is himself. That is crucial as far as I am concerned. I have a strong, strong faith that we all have within us whatever we need to manage, even though it does not always seem like that. I think my belief comes from being a storyteller and working so much with the old traditional folktales. I believe stories like Cinderella have come down to us through the ages because they make vivid the awareness that all of us will have times when we are taking out the ashes, times that feel as if they are unbearably hard. We will have those times but we can be like her. We can go on doing what needs doing to survive. And, along the way, something will happen, something that will give us the chance to change our world.

That reminds me of an old friend who started a pre-school program for extremely impoverished children. Someone asked her what she wanted for them. She answered, "I want them to be poets and princes. Poets to the extent that they will have command of their own language; princes, you know like the heroes in the old stories. They may be shoveling the shit in the stables but they will stand at the centre of their own lives."

I cannot imagine anything better to wish for anyone. It leads me also to another of my long-held convictions – that we always have choices as to how we go about living our lives. I'll leave all that for you to think about as you continue taking Kyle and his doings into your ways and days.

Good reading,
Jan

Discussion Questions

1. Kyle is an unusual kid with unusual strengths. Talk about that, exploring his approaches to life and seeing how they relate to your own.
2. When I was writing the book someone suggested the only reason Kyle could have voices in his head was mental illness (especially given that one of the voices is “an imaginary friend”). What do you think about this? Do you think that Kyle is sick? If not, why not?
3. Why is it important for Kyle to go off on his own? What does the barn mean to him? How is it part of changing his life?
4. Scott and Jill give Kyle an extraordinary amount of freedom. How do you feel about this? Would you like it? Hate it?
5. Have you ever tried not speaking? Could you try it, in the classroom, now? What are the advantages/disadvantages? What does not speaking give to Kyle?
6. What is going to happen next for Kyle? Do you think it will all be “happily ever after,” living with Scott and Jill, going back to school? Will he keep on painting? Will he really be delighted if Lady C does not simply learn to fly but flies away?
7. Kyle’s father has treated him extremely badly. Why would Kyle even think of going away with him?
8. All the major characters in the story are deeply affected by happenings in the past. What significance does the past have in your life? In the life of your family? Your neighbourhood? Your school?
9. Kyle believes that, as a kid in foster care, he is consistently stereotyped. Do you think this is true? What effect does it have on him? Does he do any stereotyping of his own?
10. Books and stories are there to reveal us to ourselves, to let us explore new worlds and try out other ways of being. What do you think you will carry away from *The Silent Summer of Kyle McGinley*? Is there anything you might come back to in times of difficulty and stress?

“Andrews has created a character with whom young readers will have empathy, with whom they will laugh and cry, and someone they will not soon forget.”

— Highly recommended, CM Magazine

“The Silent Summer of Kyle McGinley is a thoughtful and compelling read that sheds light on the deep wounds of abandonment and the fierce connection young people have to their parents, even when those parents abuse them.”

-Deborah, Goodreads.com

Writer's Craft

1. Everything in *Silent Summer* is shown through Kyle's perception but the other characters obviously have their own awareness of events. Try writing from the point of view of someone else in the story, using the same first person technique. Keep it all in the present tense – just as Kyle does. Think about what this means to you, how it changes the story and perhaps opens doors to new understandings.

2. As a writer, I seem always to be striving to say things in as few words as I can manage. I know it isn't true for everyone but my work just does get less real and certainly less powerful when I go in for extensive descriptions and an abundance of details. Have a think about this and the effect it has on you. Are there places in the story where you would like to know more? Does the sparseness perhaps offer you more freedom to make your own images? Does it help you to feel more or less deeply about what's happening? Try describing something in the book – the barn, for instance, then take out all the adjectives and adverbs. See what difference that makes.

3. I'm hoping that Kyle is a sympathetic character, one that readers will enjoy sharing time with. What have I done to make him like that? What would have caused him to be more or less likeable for you?

4. Someone once told me that when we hear a story or read it, we become everything within it. We are not only the characters but the landscape. In *Silent Summer*, we are the crow and the cage and the barn. A way to explore this is simply to say "I am....whatever" and then to let the words come, to write without stopping or censoring – not to retell the story but to inhabit whatever it is you have chosen. You may find a kind of poetry emerges; you may make unexpected discoveries.

5. Writing in "free flow" was clearly important to me as I was creating this book. Without that, there would not have been all the surprises I talked about earlier. Free flow may go on for a while. Ingen, for instance, did not appear until many drafts down the road. Free flow is only the beginning, however. The next task is to get out my critical eye – to see what really belongs and what does not; to shape the characters more fully; to intensify the emotional range. A big part of writing is choosing. Editors are an enormous help in this process. So...when you're writing yourself, I recommend knowing that big changes may be necessary; truly considering the comments of others; accepting that nothing is precious. Most importantly of all, you need to understand that this is not about your feelings; it's about finding means to let the work be the best that it can be.

"Jan has ingeniously written the story by presenting it all with dialogue, his internal musings and that of those around him. The reader becomes Kyle, feels his anxiety, his frustration and his longing for something better, although he is afraid to hope that this new placement might just be the home he's been looking for."

-Susan Rocan, Goodreads.com

"It's not a long book, only about 200 pages long, but it doesn't need to be longer ... the psychology and emotional depth of it made it stay with me for far longer than I expected."

-Rachel, Goodreads.com

About the Author

I came to Canada from England in 1963 and now live down the end of a road on a lake in Eastern Ontario. I have been writing for over thirty years, always for children and young adults because those are the stories that interest me and come into my head. My books have been shortlisted for many major awards, including the Governor General's. In 2012, one of my folktale collections won the Silver Birch Express Award in Ontario's Forest of Reading Program. I am an organizer. I've produced and directed storytelling series and orchestrated complete tellings of The Iliad and The Odyssey. Through my work, I've travelled across Canada as well as to Europe, Australia, the US and the UK. My surprises? I'm a rock climber – not a very good one but filled with enthusiasm.

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