



Out and About with . . . Peter Lerangis

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*Among all the books that compete for the attention of elementary and middle school students these days is an extraordinary series of adventures called **The 39 Clues**. Maybe you've heard of it. There are a predicted ten volumes of books published this year and next, and they are integrated with an online game and special playing cards. One of the several authors of the books is long-time writer Peter Lerangis, a fellow with a list of publications as long as your arm. Maybe both arms.*

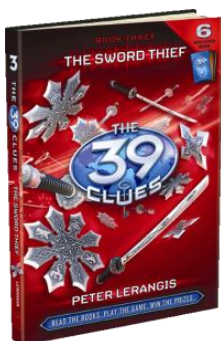
Book World asked Peter to tell the **CT Post** community a little about his books for children.

Here we go!

TA: Peter, you write middle grade series and young adult novels, have penned the third and seventh books in the ten-book mega-series **The 39 Clues**, along with a truckload of other projects. I want to ask you about how you got started writing for children, but to start, can you tell us how *The 39 Clues* came about and how you got involved?



PL: Sure, Tony. *The 39 Clues* is the brainchild of two fantastic authors, **David Levithan** and **Rick Riordan**. David, who is also an editorial director at Scholastic, had the insightful idea to reach into the place where kids are these days — games, the Internet, messaging, etc., — and bring them into the world of books. The basic concept: create a top-notch adventure-book series that makes history come alive and has a cool on-line component to enrich (rather than supplant) the story, thereby creating a zeal for history and book-reading, in both avid and reluctant readers. That's all.



The plot: Fourteen-year-old Amy and her eleven-year-old brother Dan Cahill find themselves at the reading of their grandmother Grace's will. Dan and Amy were orphaned seven years earlier after a devastating fire, so now they're all alone — except for the hundreds of other strangers at the reading, all of whom are apparently related to them! Each person is given the choice to accept one million dollars — or forsake the money and go on a hunt for 39 Clues leading to the greatest power ever known to humankind. Dan and Amy choose the hunt, and with the help of their 21-year-old au pair they embark on a journey around the world — and they find they're descendants of a powerful secret family that stretches back 500 years and includes some of the greatest thinkers and leaders of all time. They follow hints left by their ancestors — Mozart, Ben Franklin, Marie Curie, Churchill, Einstein, etc. And they find that they're in competition with those people at the reading, who are older, more experienced, and utterly ruthless.

David L called me about this in July 2007. By that time, the series structure had already been developed by him, Rick, and an editor named Rachel Griffiths. David had edited the *Spy X* and *Watchers* series, both of which had a pacing and flavor a lot like *The 39 Clues*. He also edits Gordon Korman and Judy Blundell (aka Jude Watson), and he thought we three would be just right

for the series. I think it's fair to say we were blown away by the idea and honored to have been first-round draft picks.

We writers are in charge of one thing only: the story. The ten books are the backbone of the project. The website, the cards, the game — none of them make a whole lot of sense unless you read the story. Those elements are developed by the editorial staff with the help of some cutting-edge tech and art people. If we authors have done our job right, you will feel drawn into an extraordinary journey. But *The 39 Clues* is a ten-book series, with one clue found in each book. This leaves 29 Clues — and this is where the readers' journeys can expand. They can actually enter the search for the other 29 Clues themselves. There are codes hidden in the art and the pagination. There are cards tucked into each book, many involving historical mysteries. If they choose to, they can set up an account on the website (parental permission required), "digitize" the cards, and begin the hunt.



TA: *Wow. Sounds completely engaging. Can you share some about how you got started writing children's books?*

PL: I became a writer because I bit my fingernails in the kitchen of the Smith and Wollensky Restaurant in New York City.

At the time I was a waiter, and waiters were not supposed to do such things. It was especially unwise for a waiter who really needed the job. Like a thousand others, I was really a professional actor trying to make a living "between shows." Back then I hadn't yet considered being a writer. Even though I'd always loved to write, and my best grades were always in English and creative writing, the idea scared me. I couldn't imagine finishing a book. I was going to make it as an actor, or I was going to go to law school. That was that. But in the meantime, I needed a job.

Dejected, I slumped across town and visited my girlfriend. I noticed her roommate working blissfully in her room, shades drawn, music playing, a steaming cup of tea and a typewritten manuscript on her desk. I was jealous. She was editing other people's books ... for a living ... *at home* ... on her own time! A much better job than waiting on tables. I thought, *I can SO do that.*

So I decided to try. I looked up "publishers" in the phone book and contacted the ones whose names were in boldface. They sent me tests, I sent them back. The strategy worked. For years, whenever a show closed, I'd immediately go back to editing. One of my bosses, Nancy Hall, liked my work and offered me a children's book contract. It was a dream come true. Before long, I had several published books. I'd also acted on Broadway (and in southern Connecticut, at the late, lamented **Candlewood Playhouse**). By that time my girlfriend and I had married, and we wanted to have a family. It was time to do one thing really well, instead of juggling two careers. I called up a friend (Ann Martin, who at that time was a copyeditor making the shift into full-time writing), and she gave me a list of contacts. Within weeks I had four book contracts. Two decades later, I'm still at it. And I still bite my fingernails.

At least now, my boss can't fire me.

TA: You've written — what? — a hundred books? Tell us a bit about how those early days became the foundation of your long career.

PL: Early on, I wrote books in series such as the **Hardy Boys Casefiles**, the **Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Supermysteries**, and several others — all the while writing sci fi and horror titles of my own, and a bunch of movie novelizations under the name **A. L. Singer**. At one point I wrote 36 books in 36 months.

TA: A quick tour through publishing history in the late twentieth century; thanks. Do you have a favorite book of your own?

PL: Hard to say. Possibly **Smiler's Bones**, a novel based on the true story one of history's most interesting loners. I'm delighted to be working on *The 39 Clues* — action, mystery, and history together! And I'm proud of my **Spy X** series (about two kids who become spies to find their missing mom, who is also a spy), the **Antarctica** books (a fictional lost American voyage to the South Pole), and the **Drama Club** books (a group of high school kids in a town where musicals are big business).



In the last few years my writing has taken me on a coast-to-coast tour complete with video blogs (*39 Clues*); to Moscow on Air Force One with the First Lady (**Watchers**), and all over the world to speak at schools, conferences, and libraries. I'm hoping to convince DreamWorks to let me have a tiny role (like the fourth crowd member from the right) in the *39 Clues* movie.

TA: I'll be your stunt double on that one. Tell us about the idea behind **Smiler's Bones**.



PL: I'm drawn to stories about loners, people who have to learn to fend for themselves when no one understands them. One of my favorite books as a kid was **The Forgotten Door**, by **Alexander Key**, about an friendly alien boy who encounters prejudice and fear from earth people. Minik's story was a thousand times as moving, because it was real. He came from the northernmost tribe in the world, a small group who'd never had any contact with other human beings. They had never seen a tree or eaten anything besides raw seal, auk, and maybe the occasional walrus. Into their lives sailed one of the most powerful and ambitious explorers ever, Robert Peary, who was dead-set on discovering the North Pole. To drum up publicity (and funding) for his mission, Peary brought six Polar Eskimos to New York City in 1897. The great anthropologists at the Museum of Natural History exhibited the Eskimos to the public. Their goal was to show that aboriginal humans were at the same level of evolution as everyone else. But their method exposed the Eskimos to disease, and soon eight-year-old Minik was the only one left alive. Devastated, the little boy asked for his father to be buried. But the museum had shipped the body to be dissected and studied by medical students, so they staged a fake burial to fool the boy. Minik discovered this fraud years later, as a teen. By then he'd grown up in the care of the museum's superintendent, who had not only been keeping the secret all along, but had participated in it, in a particularly shocking way. Well, when I

read about Minik's life, the story moved me so deeply I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was amazed that no one had ever written about him for young people. As a novelist, I was fascinated by the gaps in the historical record. They seemed to cry out to be filled, in the form of a novel.

TA: *What is it about writing for children that you most like — or don't like?*

PL: Things I Like:

A. People are always giving you free books

B. You stay in touch with the kid inside of you. You know, the one who never grows up and leaves a big mess behind your medulla oblongata.

C. You have funny little mind-burps. It's kind of hard to describe. I'm an intense writer. If you saw me writing a joke book you'd think it was an obituary. I'm always thinking: Is it funnier if I use *this* word? More emotional if I delete this adjective? More suspenseful if I reverse the sentence order? Making a reader laugh or cry is serious business. But once in awhile, something really takes me by surprise — a word, phrase, or idea that makes me stop short. Maybe when I read it months later it'll make me laugh or cry, but in the process it feels like a pleasurable little hiccup of the brain. That's when I know it works. And it makes my day.

D. You get to visit schools, make a fool of yourself, and people like it.

E. You're doing something for a living that your kids and their friends actually understand.

F. You meet other children's book writers and realize to your constant relief that there are other grownups who are doofuses like yourself. Or maybe it's doofi. Except **Tony Abbott**. Who's a prince among doofi.

TA: *Just let me break in here to say, "Thank you, sir."*

PL: Things I Don't Like:

Um.

Give me few minutes. I'll think of something ...

TA: *Did you have a favorite book as a child and did it influence your career as a children's writer?*

PL: I lived on adventure and sci-fi as much as, say, Life Cereal. One night a story by **Jack London**, called "To Build a Fire," gave me an out-of-body experience. It took place in the Arctic, and it was so vivid I started to shiver and feel weak. I ran downstairs to share this amazing phenomenon with my dad. He and my uncle were watching TV. I opened my mouth to explain what had happened — then shut it and ran back upstairs. I knew if I said anything, the moment would be spoiled. They wouldn't get it. So I kept it to myself. And that actually was a wise thing. I began thinking I wanted to be able to give others that same kind of experience.

TA: *With all the writing you do, you probably don't have too much time for reading, but, if you can, tell us what your current reading is now.*

PL: I'm reading a book called **Mukiwa**, a memoir of growing up in Zimbabwe by **Peter Godwin**. I'm loving it, even though it's almost unbearably sad. I just finished **Lawrence Lessig's The Future of Ideas**, and before that **Ghosts of War** by **Ryan Smithson** (a 19-year-old soldier's

memoir of his experience in Iraq) and ***What I Saw and How I Lied*** by my pal **Judy Blundell**. Next on my desk is a book called *The Postcard*, which came highly recommended. I hear it's by some wildly famous and beloved children's book author.

TA: *I think we all need to check that one out. And what can we expect to jump off your desk in the next few months?*

PL: Well, I've just finished Book 7 of *The 39 Clues*, which comes out in February 2010. It's longer than Book 3. It's also in a place Dan and Amy never dreamed of going, and they discover a secret that will change their lives forever. I could tell you the title, the setting, and the plot, but unfortunately I'd have to shoot you.

In November 2009 I have a short story coming out in a collection called ***Bites*** (Scholastic), edited by **Lois Metzger**. It's a idea that popped into my head one morning when I saw a red-tailed hawk viciously attacking an empty plastic water bottle in Central Park. Naturally this brought to mind a tale involving blood, genetics, overpopulation, a secret vampire society under Belvedere Castle, and shape-shifting. It's called "I, Blooder."

Also in November my YA novel, ***wtf***, will be published by Simon Pulse. It's a dark comedy about a night when everything goes disastrously wrong for a group of high-school friends, told from five or six different perspectives. It's funny — and raw — and should appeal to an older, mature teen audience!

In spring 2011 a German publisher is releasing an unpublished manuscript I wrote in 1989 in a series called *The Three Investigators*. The story of how I found a working copy of that manuscript could be a book in itself! It was called *Brain Wash*, but I don't know what the German title will be.



I'm incredibly excited and honored to be working on a novel with the writer Harry Mazer, about an Iraq war soldier who loses his memory and must reconstruct his life. That will be published most likely in 2011.

TA: *We'll shift things around on our bookshelves to make some room!*

Thanks, Peter, for making time for the Connecticut Post!