

Paperback Writer

You may know him from *Lemonade Mouth*, a hit Disney Channel movie adapted from his second novel that premiered this spring, but Mark Peter Hughes '88 has always been a writer. Even when he was an engineer.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

THE PAST YEAR HAS BEEN A WILD RIDE FOR MARK PETER Hughes '88.

In August, he released his third teen novel, *A Crack In the Sky* (Delacorte), the adventure of a 13-year-old boy and his pet mongoose, who save the planet from environmental catastrophe.

In April, he, his wife, Karen, and their three children traveled from their home outside Boston to New York City to attend an advance screening of *Lemonade Mouth*, a Disney Channel movie adapted from Hughes's 2007 novel of the same title. The story follows five maladjusted freshmen who are thrown together to form the most beloved band ever to grace the stage at their fictional high school.

"You have to remember," says Hughes, "I'm a guy who lives in a small cape house. And we've got a couple of really old cars. And there I was at this very real, unbelievable dream moment."

For someone who earns accolades for his ability to bring a fresh perspective to such "dream moments" in the lives of fictional teenagers, it seems fitting that Hughes is getting a taste of what it's like to find success in pursuit of a dream. Since his 2005 debut novel, *I Am the Wallpaper*, Hughes has specialized in crafting winning portraits of precocious underdogs who find their voices and discover that they can achieve more than they thought possible.

"It was over-the-top surreal," says Hughes of seeing his work brought to life on screen, a week before its national premiere.

Arriving at Rochester in the fall of 1984 to study electrical engineering, thinking at the time that it was "a safe bet," Hughes has been writing for a long time. Like many successful authors, pretty much his entire life.

He chronicles his interests in writing and storytelling through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter and on www.markpeterhughes.com and www.lemonademouth.com. The



MEET THE AUTHOR: Addressing an audience steeped in social media, Hughes is adept at relating to readers of his fiction, connecting to them through Facebook, Twitter, and the sites www.markpeterhughes.com and www.lemonademouth.com.



venues are particularly important for tween and young adult novelists, because their audience, more than any other, will not only turn online for sources of information, but also wants to feel personally connected to the writers of the books they like.

In all these outlets, Hughes is as vivid and colorful as the characters he creates. Sometimes he'll address his fans on video. Occasionally he'll appear on video and in song, as in a recent post featuring Hughes answering a reader's letter in a tune he sings and plays on his ukulele: "*Lemonade Mouth* Letter Song (Dear Mark)." And there are plenty of pictures of him with his three children Evan (13), Lucy (11), and Zoe (9).

Hughes was the director of data analysis at a Boston-area health care company when he got the break any fiction writer would die for: an offer from Random House to publish his first novel, *I Am the Wallpaper*. He had entered the manuscript in Random House's Delacorte Press Young Adult Novel Competition. It was among five finalists, attracting the attention of a Delacorte editor, Stephanie Lane Elliott. "She worked with me on a rewrite and then offered

HIS GUITAR DOESN'T WEEP: Finding the inspiration for *Lemonade Mouth* in the 2000 book *The Beatles Anthology*, Hughes (who, like his character in the novel, Stella, really does play the ukulele) has been widely praised for his portrayals of sympathetic, true-to-life teen characters.

me a contract," says Hughes. "Stephanie and I have worked together ever since."

I Am the Wallpaper tells the story of 13-year-old Floey Packer, the frumpy little sister of a much more popular girl, who feels very much like wallpaper. The book established Hughes's reputation for wild humor and uncanny insight into the lives of adolescents—as well as his tendency to insert references to the Beatles into his work, in this case, the 1967 song, "I Am the Walrus." (A bit of Hughes trivia: He was born in the Fab Four's hometown of Liverpool, England, and in the very same hospital as John Lennon).

Like Disney Channel movie favorites *High School Musical* and *Camp Rock*, *Lemonade Mouth* centers on music and big dreams. Its heroes are five freshmen at fictional Opequonsett High School who face social challenges at school and in their lives at home. They feel small, but then make it big—at least among their classmates—when they form a band they call *Lemonade Mouth*, which comes to overshadow the once hands-down school favorite among garage bands, *Mudslide Crush*.

Hollywood film producer Debra Martin Chase, whose movie credits include big tween and teen hits such as *The Princess Diaries* and *The Cheetah Girls*, first noticed *Lemonade Mouth*. Talking with *Women and Hollywood* in April, she noted that many young adult novels that come across her desk are "cookie cutter, not original." But not Hughes's novel. "The moment I finished *Lemonade Mouth*

I knew that it was something special. The characters are rich and textured, the messages age appropriate but nonetheless mature, the drama universal and compelling.”

The story is told in the first person, not by one narrator, but by at least five, and arguably, six. Naomi Fishmeier, the self-described “Scene Queen and Official Biographer of Lemonade Mouth,” as well as a columnist for the student newspaper, introduces the book. From there, band members take turns telling the story of themselves and of Lemonade Mouth.

Hughes says he got the idea for the structure from *The Beatles Anthology*, a 300-plus-page hardcover coffee-table book published in 2000 that, in scrapbook style, offers the foursome’s “own permanent written record of events.” Constructed from interviews conducted over years by both print and broadcast sources, as well as from the private archives of the then three surviving band members, the book is arranged to construct a chronological narrative.

Lennon opens the anthology, but in *Lemonade Mouth*, it’s trumpeter Wendel (Wen) Gifford. Much of Hughes’s success derives from his penchant for the absurd, and it’s a preposterous chain of events that culminates in Wen’s expletive, which lands him in detention where he meets his future bandmates, each of whom lives under challenging circumstances.

Stella Penn (electric ukulele) comes from “a family of geniuses,” she says, with an older sister at Brown. As the story opens, Stella has opened a letter reporting her IQ test result of 84. Mortified to be “a documented dummy,” as she puts it, she shines as a leader, activist, and spirited rebel whose fashion faux pas—at least in the eyes of the school’s administration—places her in detention.

Olivia Whitehead (lead vocalist) is quiet and taciturn offstage, the product of a mother who abandoned her and a father who’s in prison for armed robbery and manslaughter. She lands in detention after cutting American Lit class, instead savoring the assigned book, *The Great Gatsby*, for the third time, alone in a janitor’s closet.

Mohini (Mo) Banerjee is an overachieving, has-her-life-all-planned-out daughter of Indian immigrants who strives to balance her parents’ expectations with her desire to assimilate into the American teenage mainstream.

And then there’s Charlie Hirsh. He’s a twin, but his brother, Aaron, was a stillborn, and his birthday celebration never takes place without a family visit to Aaron’s grave. Chubby, with unruly, frizzy hair, Charlie secures his path to detention when he retaliates to a spitball attack, missing his target and hitting Mo instead.

“They’re all part of me,” says Hughes of his eclectic cast of characters. “Stella is a lawbreak-

er and a defier and means really well and doesn’t always get it right. And that’s me. Olivia, on the other hand, is quite different. She’s very quiet, and she has a very hard time talking about herself, and her own work, and that’s me too, at different times.”

Mo is drawn from Hughes’s own experience as well.

Although raised in the United States, Hughes was born in England to an English family—a “very, very English” family, he adds. “I’m American, but I’m also British. I never feel more American than when I’m in Britain. And there are plenty of occasions here where I feel very British in the midst of America.”

Hughes says the movie leaves his story and characters “pretty much intact.”

“What struck me,” he says, “was how little they actually changed from my book. The characters are all there, and they are my characters. The story is there, and it’s my story.”

When Hughes wrote *Lemonade Mouth*, he was still working full time as a data analyst. After the novel’s publication—and its favorable reviews—he quit his job to become a full time writer, a story he told in May 2007 on National Public Radio’s “Take This Job and Shove It” segment.

“Suddenly dropping the job is way out of character for me,” he told Michele Norris, the host who interviews Americans who have left steady jobs to chase their dreams.

But the success of *Lemonade Mouth* may well have depended on that decision.

That summer, Hughes took his entire family on an eight-week book tour across the country in the family’s minivan, a 1996 Honda Odyssey wrapped in bright yellow plastic with images that mimicked the novel’s cover art.

Hughes gave readings and book signings at 60 stores across 38 states. And the car that was already 11 years old traveled more than 12,000 more miles on the journey.

For the time being, the opening of the movie has overshadowed Hughes’s latest novel. But he has no intention of letting *A Crack in the Sky* remain in the shadows.

True, he’s at work on a sequel to *Lemonade Mouth*. But he’s at work on a sequel to *A Crack in the Sky* as well.

He’s not giving any hints about what’s to come. But one thing is certain. Both sequels will be about big, dramatic events, because books about teens have to be.

“They’re looking at their successes as the greatest triumphs known to humankind. And their failures as the deep depths of depression and awfulness,” says Hughes of the modern teen.

“At that particular time in our lives, we see everything as one extreme or the other.” **R**

A Fab Five

Much like the five underdogs who form Lemonade Mouth, here’s a list of five extraordinary tween books that might have escaped your notice, but are exceptional nonetheless—and deserve a place on bookshelves.

—Mark Peter Hughes ’88

How to Steal a Dog by

Barbara O’Connor (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). A story about a southern town, a homeless family, and a girl with a plan to fix everything.

The Outlandish Adventures of Liberty Aimes by Kelly

Easton (Random House, 2009). A wild, raucous ride in a magical world a lot like our own except with mutant animals, terrifying inventions, and a talking chicken with human feet.

Galaxy Games by Greg R.

Fishbone (Tu Books, Fall 2011). The first in a series about a boy who stumbles into greatness after an alien spaceship visits Earth to recruit a team of kid athletes. Out this fall, I was lucky enough to get to read it early.

Newsgirl by Liza Ketchum

(Viking, 2009). During the gold rush of 1851, a young girl in San Francisco must disguise herself as a boy to sell newspapers and ends up in an accidental balloon ride adventure.

Climbing the Stairs by

Padma Venkatraman (Putnam, 2008). Set in India in 1941, it’s the first-person account of a teenage girl in the middle of political and family turmoil.