

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

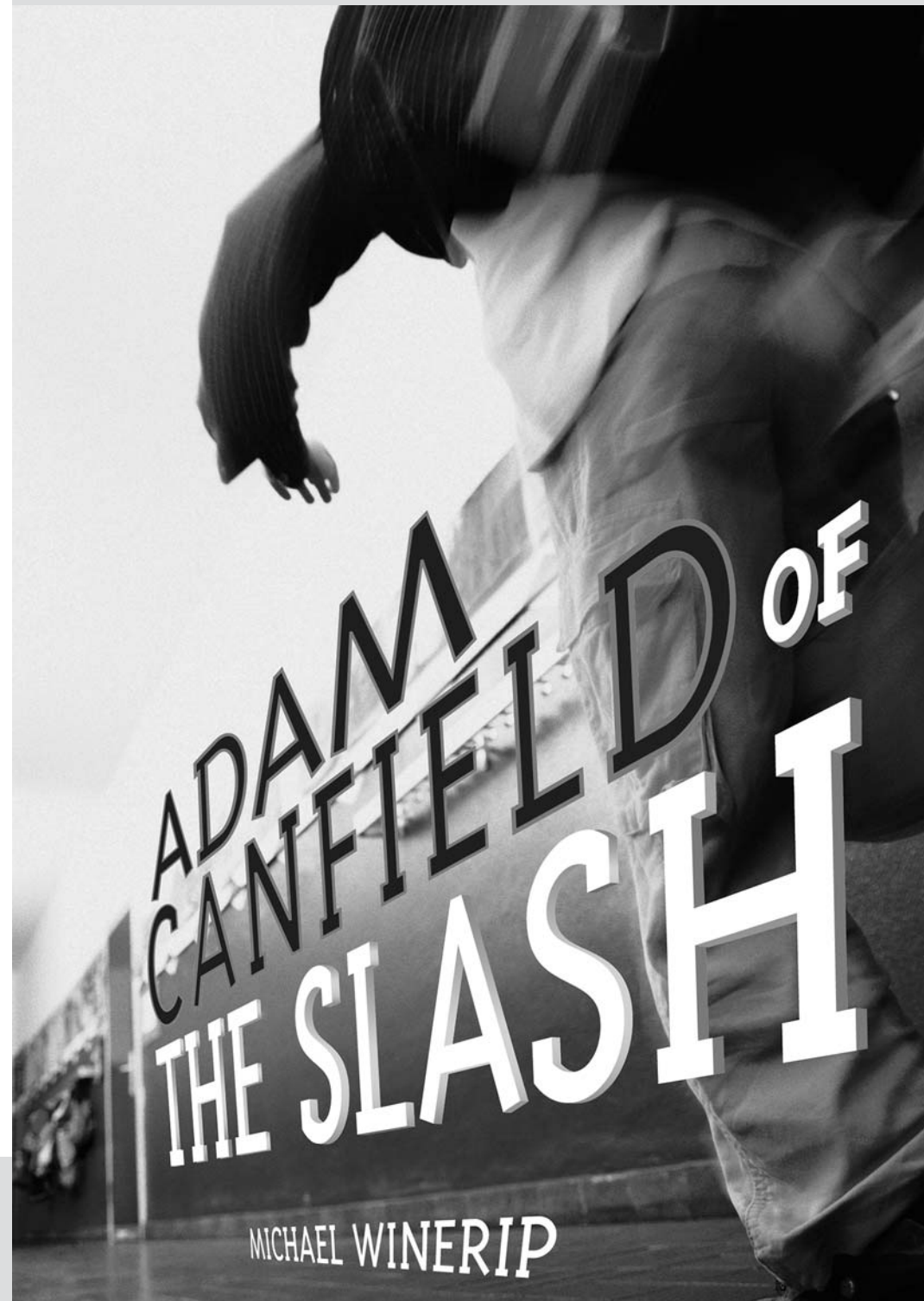


**MICHAEL WINERIP** has spent more than thirty years as a reporter and now works as an education columnist for the *New York Times*. Armed with a collection of colorful stories and some distinct opinions regarding today's educational system, Michael Winerip wrote his debut book for young readers, *Adam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

He approached this book 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 adds, "As a reporter, I've learned 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.

Prepared by Pat Scales, Director of Library Services, South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, Greenville, South Carolina



## SYNOPSIS

Adam Canfield has become coeditor of the *Slash*, the award-winning newspaper for Harris Elementary/Middle School. Until now, Adam has served as the number-one star reporter, a job that he's been happy to fit into his overscheduled life. Like most kids in his neighborhood, Adam is "enriched to death." He has baritone lessons, jazz band rehearsals, soccer, and swimming. He is in the Math Olympiad club, the Quiz Bowl Gladiator meet, and the Geography Challenge. And now he must attend a before-school/after-school voluntary/mandatory statewide test-prep class. Then his friend Jennifer convinces him that they would make a great team at the helm of the *Slash*. She is "steady and dependable," and he likes to "live life on the edge." In the beginning, Adam is reluctant. The job of star reporter offers some flexibility, and the role of coeditor means assigning stories, managing a pesky and precocious cub reporter, and dealing with a sarcastic school principal who is only interested in articles that "propel the Good Ship Harris forward."

The first item of business is dealing with Phoebe, the third-grade cub reporter who insists on doing a feature story on Eddie the janitor. Adam wants to sink the story idea, but Jennifer feels it has merit. When Mrs. Marris, the principal, takes her pen to the story and deletes an important line, Adam and Jennifer begin to "smell a rat." What is Mrs. Marris hiding? Then Mrs. Marris insists that they run a front-page story about Miss Minnie Bloch, a lady who left \$75,000 to the school. Except Mrs. Marris wants to dictate the story. As Adam and Jennifer begin investigating, they uncover enough information to keep the town gossips busy for months. Helping them with their story is Eddie the janitor, who has been remodeling the restroom adjacent to Mrs. Marris's office; Mr. Brooks, a beloved history teacher whose excellent teaching has been questioned because of standardized test scores; and Danny, a friend of Adam's father who knows about Miss Bloch and has the "goods" on Mrs. Marris's character. How do the two editors report the information they have without damaging their "permanent records"? What would a good journalist do?

Adam and Jennifer take their job seriously and use their intelligence to report a scandal so big that even they are surprised by its magnitude. This book contains humor and sarcasm, as well as frightening truths about our overscheduled lives and the state of public education in this nation. It also holds a lesson about students' rights.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

### Before reading:

1. Discuss the kinds of questions that a journalist might ask when investigating a story. Have readers imagine that they are Adam and Jennifer, searching for information regarding the gift of \$75,000 that Miss Minnie Bloch left to Harris Elementary/Middle School. What are five questions that might be asked during the investigation?
2. Ask readers to discuss the meaning of the First Amendment. Invite a lawyer to speak to young readers to help them understand their rights as students. Readers may also want to investigate their school's policy regarding student newspapers. Is the school's policy in line with students' rights under the U.S. Constitution?

### While reading:

1. Describe the neighborhood where Adam lives. On page 87, Danny explains the theory of the German philosopher Hegel to Adam and Jennifer. How does Hegel's theory apply to the kids at Harris Elementary/Middle School? How does it apply to your life? What is the solution to an overscheduled life?
2. Adam Canfield has grown accustomed to serving as star reporter for the *Slash*. Now he has worked his way up to the job of coeditor. Why does he worry that his new role might be boring? Explain why he thinks that the job of star reporter is more exciting. Discuss whether his attitude about his job changes by the end of the novel.
3. Jennifer is "steady and dependable," while Adam likes to "live life on the edge." How do these coeditors of the *Slash* complement each other? Describe Phoebe. How does she fit into the team?
4. Explain Adam's philosophy about cub reporters. How does his attitude interfere with his ability to recognize Phoebe's true talent? Why does Jennifer defend Adam to Phoebe? How does Jennifer give Phoebe confidence?
5. Phoebe's idea to do a story on Eddie the janitor turns out to be a good one. Why doesn't Adam like the idea in the beginning? What does Jennifer see in the story that Adam doesn't? At what point does Adam realize that the story about Eddie the janitor is important?
6. Discuss why Mrs. Marris wants the story about Miss Minnie Bloch's gift in the *Slash*. Why doesn't she want to reveal the amount of money that Miss Bloch left the school? Discuss how her secrecy gives Adam and Jennifer the curiosity to get to the bottom of the story.
7. Mrs. Marris tells Adam and Jennifer (p. 22), "I would hope you will always ask yourselves, Is this story helping propel the Good Ship *Harris* forward?" How do Adam and Jennifer accomplish this mission? Discuss how Mrs. Marris's advice backfires on her.

8. Mrs. Marris has her own ideas about topics for the newspaper. She likes “Just Say No” articles and features about Multicultural Month. Explain why Adam has a disdain for these topics. What approach might Adam take in writing an article about these topics? How might he defend his writing to Mrs. Marris?
9. Adam tells Phoebe, “Our job as reporters is to tell the truth as we see it. It has to be backed by facts, but that’s what good newspapers do” (p. 116). Discuss how Adam and Jennifer practice good journalism as they uncover the facts regarding Miss Minnie Bloch’s gift. How do Eddie, Danny, and Mr. Brooks contribute to the story?
10. Discuss what Adam means when he says, “A good reporter needs to know what questions NOT to ask” (p. 262).
11. Why is the *Slash* an appropriate title for the Harris Elementary/Middle School newspaper? Explain how the name takes on a new meaning after Adam and Jennifer finish with the Miss Minnie Bloch story.
12. Discuss the definition of censorship. Mrs. Marris claims to be against censorship, but demands that Adam and Jennifer take out some of the content from the article about Eddie the janitor. How does Mrs. Marris defend her actions? Define censorship from Mrs. Marris’s point of view.
13. Miss Minnie Bloch lived in a shotgun house in a section of town called the Willows. Why do you think Jennifer and Adam had never noticed nor heard of the Willows until Danny told them about the neighborhood?
14. Cite examples of subtle acts of racism in the novel.
15. Why is Mr. Brooks Adam’s favorite teacher? It is Mr. Brooks who teaches Adam about freedom of the press. How does Mr. Brooks give Adam the courage to forge ahead with the story about the gift from Minnie Bloch?
16. Explain the reaction of the school board to Adam and Jennifer’s story about Mrs. Marris.
17. What do you think some of Michael Winierip’s opinions might be about the state of education in our nation? Compare and contrast your school’s curriculum and testing program to that of Harris Elementary/Middle School. How might you defend a teacher like Mr. Brooks who has a true love for knowledge?

#### POST-READING ACTIVITY

Ask readers to write a story that might be featured on the front page of the *Slash* after Mrs. Marris’s departure. Debate whether the school board will try to censor the story.

#### AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL WINERIP

- Q. Many ideas for the plot lines in *Adam Canfield of the Slash* came from your newspaper columns. Can you fill us in?
  - A. Without giving away too much of the plot, I really did cover a smile contest in Louisville, Kentucky, and I really did write about a rich suburb on Long Island, New York, that tried to tear down everyone’s basketball hoops. I also lived through a gold plumbing scandal that forced the resignation of a top school official in Miami, Florida. And I knew a man who made a living finding homes for ornery dogs and a lady who lived like a pauper but left a ton of money to her New Jersey town. In general, I’ve spent way more time than any normal grownup should writing about suburban zoning. From this I have learned that you can make all this stuff up, but if you’ve earned your living as a newspaper reporter, you don’t really have to.
- Q. There are so many themes in *Adam Canfield of the Slash* that middle-schoolers will relate to. One of these themes is the toll it takes on kids if they lead overstressed, overscheduled lives. Can you expand on this for us?
  - A. I’ve seen overprogrammed children at every school I visit across this country in my job as *New York Times* national education columnist. I can personally confirm that there is not a state in America without too many overprogrammed kids. And as a father of four living in the suburbs, I see them every evening around my dinner table. I can’t believe how much harder kids are pushed today than when I was a kid. I think it is unhealthy, even cruel and mean-spirited, but I haven’t a clue what to do about it. Like most American kids today, mine are on a treadmill that is moving insanely fast. But I have no easy solution to offer, either in my life or through Adam Canfield. It’s awfully hard to jump off the treadmill when everyone else keeps racing.
- Q. Adam Canfield is a very funny, kid-friendly page turner, but it’s also a vehicle for you, as a national education columnist for the *New York Times*, to express your views on current educational and social issues. How do you so seamlessly weave these into the text to convey a message?
  - A. I’ve spent more than thirty years as a reporter, writing about education and social policy. I’ve lived in Hazard, Kentucky (population 5,000), and covered Appalachia; in Miami, Florida, I reported on race riots and the Mariel boatlift; in Canton, Ohio, I wrote about the men and women who make Hoover vacuum cleaners and Timkin steel; and in New York I did an adult book about the homeless mentally ill. Being a reporter is such a privilege. You get invited into so many different people’s homes, from the very poor to the very rich. Every bit of that has gone into writing *Adam Canfield of the Slash*, although my hope is that kids

reading the book will barely notice. They need to be spending their time laughing a lot and worrying whether the *Slash's* star reporters can wipe out evil before it wipes out them. The social policy is quietly nestled in the background; it makes up the trappings that I hope will make the book feel different and fresh to kids.

- Q.** In your view, how important are trade books, like your own *Adam Canfield of the Slash*, in turning children into readers, as opposed to mandated reading programs and required textbooks?
- A.** I believe we are making a terrible mistake in schools today. We're so focused on teaching children the mechanics of reading that we're not spending enough time helping nurture a love of reading. A child who has learned the mechanics of reading but doesn't love books has failed reading—I don't care what the test scores are. And you don't learn to love books by reading a ten-page excerpt in a textbook or on a computer. Part of the joy of reading is starting at the front cover and, when you finally get to the back cover, closing that book and putting it away with a feeling of accomplishment and a tinge of sadness; the good ones always end too soon. *Adam Canfield of the Slash* is meant to be a fun read, but at the same time it's filled with all kinds of tough ethical problems that kids—and adults—try to puzzle through daily. I hope a young reader will see that you don't have to fly away to a faraway kingdom or ride on a magic train to find battles of epic proportion. There are tons of evil and bravery to be found right there at your doorstep, even if it's a doorstep in a nice suburb.
- Q.** Mrs. Marris says that she is against censorship, but she censors the stories that Adam and Jennifer put in the *Slash*. Why is it important for kids to understand their rights and responsibilities under the First Amendment? How can knowing their rights protect them from school administrators like Mrs. Marris?
- A.** In a few simple words, the First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees Americans the right to free speech and protects a free press. That two-centuries-old guarantee has made the newspaper a vital part of our democracy. It has given America some of the greatest and most powerful newspapers in the world—including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*. And that First Amendment has made it possible for ordinary reporters, like Adam, Jennifer, and Phoebe of the *Slash*, to stand up to people like Mrs. Marris, who have much more power. However, the right to free speech and a free press also carries tremendous responsibilities.

Reporters must get the facts right, and as Adam, Jennifer, and Phoebe learn, that's hard. Mrs. Marris's idea of the facts and Mr. Brooks's idea of the facts and Eddie the janitor's idea of the facts are all different, and one of the toughest jobs the *Slash* staff has is to balance all those views and, in the end, produce a fair,

balanced, and truthful news story. While the courts have given principals and school boards the right to edit and oversee school newspapers, the courts have also ruled that school newspapers like the *Slash* have the right to print the truth. And that's why Adam, Jennifer, and Phoebe work so hard at reporting out each story and tracking down every last fact.

## OTHER BOOKS TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST

- ***Boys Rock!*** by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (Delacorte, 2005)  
Wally Hatford becomes involved with a summer newspaper project and uncovers a mysterious and scary secret in the cellar of Oldaker's bookstore. Will he print the secret or keep it to himself?
- ***Darby*** by Jonathon Scott Fuqua (Candlewick Press, 2002)  
In 1926, Darby Carmichael stirs up trouble in Marlboro County, South Carolina, when she writes a story for the local newspaper promoting racial equality.
- ***Hoot*** by Carl Hiaasen (Knopf, 2002)  
Roy Eberhardt, a new kid at Trace Middle School, takes on an entire construction company in an effort to save endangered burrowing owls that live in a vacant lot where a restaurant is about to be built.
- ***The Landry News*** by Andrew Clements, (Simon and Schuster, 1999)  
illustrated by Salvatore Murdocca  
When fifth-grader Cara Landry writes and publishes an editorial about a burned-out teacher, she raises issues related to the First Amendment and students' rights of expression.
- ***The Nutty News*** by Ron Barrett (Knopf, 2005)  
This hilarious parody on newspapers includes silly stories like "Gerbil Elected President of France" and "One-Minute-a-Day School Opens." There is a Dear Gabby column and funny advertisements that will tickle even the most serious young journalists.
- ***The Printer's Apprentice*** by Stephen Krensky (Yearling, 1996)  
Ten-year-old Gus Croft, an apprentice to printer William Bradford, meets John Peter Zenger and begins to form his own opinion about the freedom of the press.

## WEBSITES

On Journalism:

*National Elementary Schools Press Association*—[www.nespa.org](http://www.nespa.org)

On Students' Rights:

*American Civil Liberties Union*—[www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)