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Q & A with James Klise

By Patricia J. Murphy | Dec 12, 2022

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James Klise is on a mission. As a teacher librarian at CICS Northtown Academy in Chicago, and an Edgar and Stonewall Honor Award-winning YA author, Klise is passionate about getting the right books into the right hands at the right time. His YA novels Love Drugged and The Art of Secrets, and his upcoming novel I'll Take

Everything You Have, dive into the lives of teens discovering themselves, questioning their sexuality, and trying to learn right from wrong on the streets of Chicago. PW spoke with Klise about how he tried on a variety of careers before becoming a librarian and then a novelist, and how he writes books that he wished he had when he was a teen with questions of his own.

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my students could use at home, and I was miserable. This experience taught me that what I love doing most is spending time with people. It's all the stories that I hear all day long, all the discoveries and triumphs—and heartbreaks—and being surrounded by people. Those are the best things about working in a school.

And what has been the greatest challenge?

Again, looking through the lens of the pandemic, it brought so many challenges into education spaces. To start, we have a generation of students who forgot what it means to spend the day together and be fully present. They have also forgotten how to navigate conflicts successfully, and to let things roll off their backs. I'd say that our students are still demonstrating some of that loss in terms of social learning at school. And this has created discipline issues that we haven't seen before. It's fascinating and challenging, and hopefully temporary.

When did you first begin writing? What was the impetus to start writing YA novels?

Like many other writers, I became a writer because teachers asked me to write stories. At the time, I found these assignments both fun and challenging. I went to college to become an architect. But it wasn't until college when I was taking creative writing classes and my teachers were saying, "You know, this is something you're good at!" that I thought about becoming a writer. Eventually I earned a master's degree and kept writing and publishing short stories. When I began working in the library, I first read John Green, Walter Dean Myers, and Laurie Halse Anderson, and so many authors who inspired me. I wondered if I might write for teen readers, too.

How did you choose to write stories with LGBTQ+ characters?

The first time I went to graduate school, I never included a single queer character in any stories I wrote. I don't think that I was mature or experienced enough to write about it. I didn't know how to articulate what I was going through, and I was too afraid to write about it. So, I wrote stories that anybody could have written. Not surprisingly, none of what I wrote sold because it wasn't based on my own life experience. When I did find the courage to tell the stories that only I could tell, I began writing these stories and was published. Now, everything I write about, even though it's imagined, is through this lens. One of the things about working in a high school and heading the school's Gay Straight Alliance is when teenagers began confiding in me about their own experience, I started to remember what it was like to be afraid and confused. These conversations led me to revisit all that in my first book, *Love Drugged*.

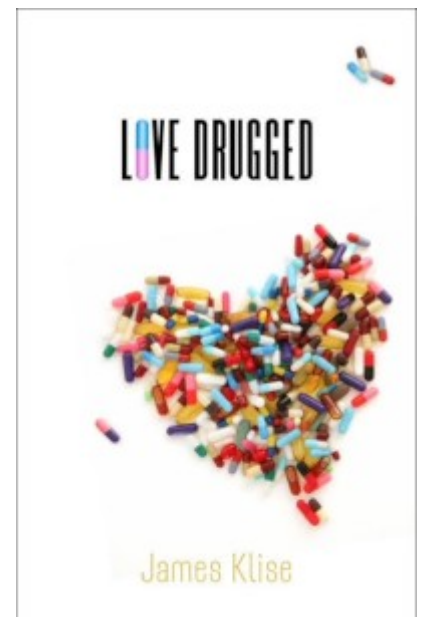
What fuels your writing, and your research?

When and how did you become a teacher librarian?

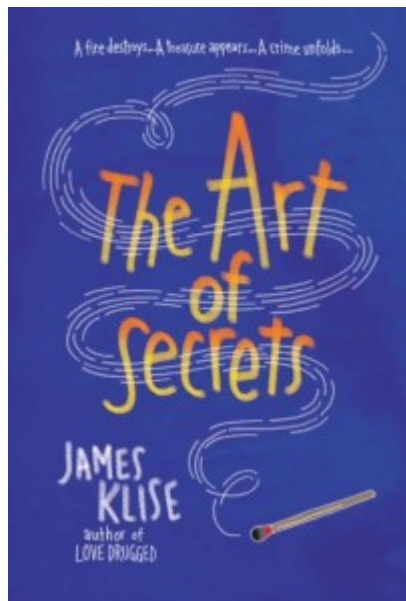
I was 35 years old when I began working as a librarian. Before that, I spent a lot of time doing other jobs including corporate writing, public relations, marketing, and then some teaching. When I was getting my master's degree in English, I had the opportunity to teach and that helped me decide that I wanted to work with students. The library setting appealed to me the most because it allowed me to be a resource for students without having to grade them. This is my happy place. And it's been that place for almost two decades.

What has been your favorite thing about working in the library?

If you'd asked me this four years ago, I would have said that it's creating space—a place where students want to be, can find resources, and I can help them be successful academically, creatively, and personally. But during the pandemic, I was creating all kinds of virtual online spaces and discovering new resources that



I'm guided by my curiosity and the fact that the story holds my interest. The books I write are inspired by things I'm already obsessed with, like Chicago history and queer history, so I don't need to do a lot of research before I write. Later, during revision, I research to confirm all the facts and small details I've already learned through my lifetime of obsessing. While I was writing *I'll Take Everything You Have*, I would start every day by reading that day's *Chicago Tribune* from 1934 just to get a sense of what was on people's minds, what the mood of people was at that time, and even the weather. It was very helpful in centering the point of view of my main character.



Can you talk a little about the characters in your first two books and in your new novel? What do these three books have in common? How are they different?

Love Drugged is about a closeted and confused high school freshman who gets his hands on an experimental drug that promises to make him straight. *The Art of Secrets* is about a ruthless, outrageous high school fundraising scam. And my upcoming novel, *I'll Take Everything You've Got*, is a queer coming-of-age crime story set in Chicago in the summer of 1934. The common elements that link all three of these books are that they're all set in Chicago, are about outsiders and the outsider experience, and are about the way that secrets can control people's lives. They're also stories about characters who for very different reasons try to get away with scams and deceitful enterprises.

What is it about scams and deceit that intrigues you so much?

Ask anyone who knows me: I've always been a rule follower—and I was even a Boy Scout! Maybe I write novels about cons and deceitful situations because I remember so vividly what it was like to be a closeted young person. Many queer people are forced to tell lies in order to feel safe. *Love Drugged* describes that exact experience: a lie that controls one teenager's whole life. *The Art of Secret*, chronicles an elaborate hoax, a lie that controls a large community of people. In my new book, the characters commit crimes only to keep their heads above water during the Great Depression. That was a time, like now, when the outrageous divide between rich and poor was evident everywhere. During really hard times, people make desperate choices and take terrible risks. It's awful in real life, but very useful when plotting a novel.

In what ways has being a teacher librarian influenced your novel writing?

There are so many ways, but I think the biggest one is that my work as a librarian teaches me every day that readers bring all sorts of personal responses to books. It's the same as our response to any art form—the responses are so personal. I see this during my monthly book club at the school where I lead book discussions; when I am having conversations with students about books, or when they are checking out and/or returning books, there's rarely a consensus on what is or is not a great book. This knowledge gives me great comfort as a writer. I don't feel burdened to create a book that everyone is going to love. Instead, it's more about writing a book that resonates with me personally and that is more likely going to resonate with readers out there who are like me.



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