**Between our pages**

Episode 3 with James Foley

[0:00] Music.

[0:10] Fiona: Welcome, you're listening to Between Our Pages, a Premier's Reading Challenge WA podcast.

This episode was recorded on Whadjuk Noongar land. We acknowledge the traditional custodians and pay respect to their elders, past, present and emerging.

My name is Fiona Bartholomaeus and together we'll be diving into the wonderful world of books and reading right here in Western Australia.

Today, we're chatting with children's author and illustrator James Foley about his, action-packed new book called Secret Agent Mole, Book 1: Goldfish-Finger.

Let's go!

[0:39] Music.

[0:52] Secret Agent Mole Book 1: Goldfish-Finger is an illustrated story full of mystery, humour, action and teamwork as it follows Max and his trusty team on a secret spy mission.

It's the latest publication from children's author and illustrator James Foley, the writer behind the popular title Stellarphant.

James, thanks for joining me.

James: Thanks for having me.

Fiona: On your website, one of the first things that you read is that you make children's books for children who read books and if you're a child and you're eating a book, you're doing it wrong.

Love it so much. What made you put that on your website?

James: I just couldn't think of anything better at the time.

You know, and if kids wanna eat the books, I suppose I shouldn't condone that, but you know, up to them, up to the parents, you have duty of care. Don't blame me.

Fiona: Now you've written quite a few books for a young audience. What is it about children's literature that draws you to it?

James: I loved reading books as a kid. I loved making picture books, loved reading picture books, graphic novels, comics, chapter books, choose your own adventures, everything.

And I never really got into adult fiction quite so much. I've read some, but just something about being able to make books for little kids and big kids, that has always pulled me back.

Fiona: And it's great that some of the books that you've written, even though they're probably aimed towards more children, anyone can really pick them up and read it. Like Stellarphant was super popular and I really enjoyed it myself.

James: Thank you. And I think a lot of the time when you're making books for kids, it's also books for kids and their caregivers, their parents, grandparents, whatever, they're books to be read together.

[2:11] Fiona: So tell us about your new title, Secret Agent Mole 1: Goldfish-Finger, what is it about?

James: Secret Agent Mole, it's a new graphic novel series I've been making with Scholastic, and it's about three little trainee secret agents. One, a main character, Max, Maximilian Mole, he has always wanted to be a secret agent ever since he was a baby mole. We've got Helena Hippo, who used to be a wrestler called Helena Handbasket, And we've got Bug, June Bug, who is a literal bugging device, she's an expert bomb defuser and hacker and all that sort of stuff.

And they are working together as a team to try and become secret agents, and in doing so, they have to go up against some very nefarious villains like Goldfish-Finger, who is a very evil goldfish, who is stealing lots of gold from the city's banks. And his loyal hench-fish, Toxin, who is a puffer fish, and also the very, very evil techno terrorist, Dr. Nude, who is a naked mole rat.

So it's been lots of fun to think up these strange little animal villains and the adventures of Max and his team.

Fiona: It sounds like you've got some great lore and characters going on there. You almost got all three of them with alliteration and then June Bug didn't quite get there.

James: I never even intended her to have a first name she was just called Bug and they still just call her Bug. But then when we started introducing the characters at the very start of the book we did all of them with a little James Bond intro, the Bond, James Bond.

[3:38] I didn't want her to be bug... bug. Well, maybe that would have been funnier. Yeah, so we just gave her a name at the very last minute. Sometimes that happens.

Fiona: So what was the inspiration behind the book and the characters?

James: I've always loved Bond stories, spy stories, always loved graphic novels, but I was coming to the end of my Sally Tinker series with Fremantle Press. I'd done four graphic novels with them, Brobot, Dunzilla, Gastronauts, Chickensaurus, and a number of shorter comics with the same characters for the New South Wales Education Department and their magazine called The School Magazine.

[4:13] And I was wanting to take a big break from graphic novels because they take so much time and effort, I was getting burnt out from making them.

And then Scholastic emailed me out of the blue and said, oh, look, we love your stuff would you like to make a graphic novel series for us? And I went, oh, oh, that's a good opportunity. Oh, you twisted my rubber arm.

So I had to have a go. I didn't have an idea though. So I called up my friend, Matt Cosgrove, who's a fantastic writer, illustrator, really nice guy, and he has done the Macca the Alpaca books and he's done Worst Week Ever with Scholastic as well.

And I just said, look mate, what's it like to work for Scholastic? What are they looking for? You know, what's the goss? You can help me out. You can be my mole in the organization. And then I went, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, okay, I've got to go. I've got an idea.

I suddenly had this image of this character in disguise dressed up as a vulture. Room full of vultures and that's a scene that might happen in book four if we can get that far but I then just expanded it all out all these other characters and scenarios and scenes just came flowing out and it doesn't usually happen that easily but it did with this and I'm really excited.

Fiona: I always love hearing that from authors where it's just a throwaway line or they just see something in the street and go hang on wait a second and then a whole world forms from it.

James: Yeah yeah I think being a writer, being an illustrator, being a creative is just always going, what if, what if, and, and people often ask where do ideas come from and they come from everywhere all the time, if you're looking out for them, it's just a matter of finding the best sort of ones, you know.

[5:47] Fiona: And the book is completely illustrated because you are an illustrator. How do you approach the creation of your story? Do you focus on characters first, focus, on art? Is there a bit of a crossover?

James: Some writer-illustrator friends of mine, they always start with just writing first, but I always start with an image first. The story is always inspired by some sort of image in my head, a scenario, a character.

And then I'll go, okay, cool. This sounds like there's something behind it, let's start brainstorming, let's just think about it while I'm walking the dog or doing the dishes. I'll, start brainstorming character designs and figuring out who everyone is, and that can give you story ideas at the same time, and then I'll start bullet pointing out what each story will be. So just the beats of the story, this happens in this, then this, and this in this. No dialogue or anything yet unless it's a really cool line I want to include, just bullet points.

And then once that's all outlined then I can see the start, the middle, the end, then I'll start writing it out like a script, because when you're doing a graphic novel, you don't need to have big flowery descriptions about the internal monologue of someone and what this lovely drapes on the wall remind you of.

[6:52] You just, you will draw all that stuff. So you just write it out like a film script, like a play script.

And then once that's all approved, then I can start sketching out every panel in every spread with all the illustrations and all the words plugged into it to get a draft graphic novel.

Then once that's approved, I can do the final artwork.

Fiona: And I can imagine as you're going with both the written word and the illustrations, new ideas probably start to form.

James: Yeah, yeah, you'll get new ideas along the way to make that story better. You'll probably also get new ideas for other stories down the line, that happens to me quite a bit, or you could just be daydreaming about something entirely different. What you're gonna have for dinner, what you need to buy at the shops.

Yeah, it's a really, really fun process, I really enjoy it.

Fiona: So for our listeners, could you tell them why they should pick up and read Secret Agent Mole?

James: If you enjoy funny stories that you can read with your kids or grandkids, if you enjoy adventurous stories and action-packed stories, if you like reading the Bad Guys but maybe, want it to have a little bit of a James Bond flavour to it, then this is the new series for you.

Fiona: And your books vary quite greatly in topics from astronaut elephants to dinosaurs, vikings and more. Why is it important for children and students to have these books on such a wide variety of topics even though they may be fiction?

James: Sure, well I mean otherwise we'd all be reading exactly the same books about exactly the same stuff, wouldn't we? Just be everything about the boy wizard who's doing this or that or the other thing, so we've got to have lots of different books so that there's things to cater for all sorts of interests that kids are into, and also we've got to have books about all sorts of different characters so that kids can see themselves represented there.

I'm not necessarily saying that, you know, some young very incredibly intelligent super moles are going to pick up this book and have a read, but Max Mole he's a kid who loves being a spy, has always wanted to be a spy, but there's lots of obstacles in his way. So, I mean, everyone can feel like an underdog at times and you know, kids can identify with that sort of stuff.

Fiona: And now the books that you have written in the past, you've written quite a lot, some standalone, some series. What are the benefits of being able to write in these two different styles?

James: I think doing series is fun because if you get extra ideas along the way, you can just go, oh cool, I'll save that for book two or three or 10 or whatever. But I mean, the con of a series is that there is the possibility that one day you might get sick of doing it, but your publisher and your readers want you to do more.

I haven't had that that situation yet, so hopefully I don't.

With a standalone, the benefit I suppose is that you can just make that story and throw everything you've got at it, and it's just one wonderful little standalone thing, but you can then miss those characters too if you don't have any other ideas for them. You can be like, I wonder how they're doing, you can wanna go back and visit them again in a new story, but maybe you just haven't got the idea yet.

[9:37] So pros and cons both ways.

Fiona: Luckily with this book, you've kind of already planned a couple in the series to begin with.

James: Yes, we've got three contracted to start with, I have finished the illustrations for book two. That comes out towards August, September this year, 2023.It's called The Boar Identity. It's got a pig in it called Neil Hamstrong, and Dr. Nude's back in that one as well.

Fiona: Watch out.

James: That's right. And then book three, it'll be out March, 2024 and I think it's going to be called Dr. Nude. So he's kind of the overarching villain across these first three books and then hopefully we'll get to do more.

We'll see. I've got ideas for about eight, nine, 10 or something like that so far so I'm really hoping I get to do some more.

Fiona: Well, with this first one, you have just toured across Australia. What was that experience like for you?

James: Exhausting. Yeah. I had some flight credits left over from the COVID times. So I went to Sydney, I went to Melbourne for the first time in a long time, caught up with lots of friends I hadn't seen in ages and I spent three days in each of those cities and I also visited bookshops in Perth for two days.

So 66 bookshops in eight days. Yeah, it was a lot.

Fiona: Sounds like a lot of traveling going on there and quickly scribbling in books throughout the 66 that you hit.

James: Oh my goodness, yeah, yeah. But I mean, it was great, when you've got like a hire card that's got the built-in nav, that was super handy, and I had a stamp that I could put in all the books so that I didn't have to illustrate each one. I could just stamp an illustration into it and then quickly scribble a signing and then I was onto the next one.

[11:06] Fiona: As an author, how important is it for you to meet your readers and have a chat about what they thought about your books?

James: I think that's super important because you need to keep in contact with your audience to remember who it is you're doing this for, and to remember their interests and their tone of voice and their vibe, their energy, you know, to sort of remember what it was like to be that age as well.

And I think it's important to, just from the standpoint of it keeps you a bit honest, because they're gonna tell you exactly what they thought. If they didn't like a particular character or whatever else, they're gonna tell you, but if they loved it, they'll tell you that too.

And also it's really great for kids to meet authors and illustrators, because then they can go, oh, books don't just come from bookshops and libraries, they come from real people. People actually sit down and do this as a job and maybe I could do that one day as a job too. Yeah, there's benefits both ways.

[11:58] Fiona: And as the Premiers Reading Challenge is almost back for 2023, how much has reading helped you with your writing?

James: Huge amount and it still does all the time because, it's teaching me, it's inspiring me, it's giving me story ideas, it's giving me ideas for, illustration techniques or writing techniques that other people have used that I think, you know, that'd be cool to try, maybe I'll have a go at a similar sort of thing so that I can see how that works in my style.

Yeah, it's a huge thing, you have to keep reading to be a writer. You have to keep viewing images and illustrations to be an illustrator because it keeps you reaching and striving for the next sort of thing to challenge yourself.

If we don't expand, we start to contract, yeah? So we've got to keep actually striving for that next thing that's gonna challenge us and stretch us.

Fiona: It's a never ending learning journey.

James: Always. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. You can't reach perfection. It's a moving target, but you gotta keep going as far as you can.

Fiona: Before we let you go today, I've got some rapid fire questions that I'm gonna ask you and I just want the first answer that pops into your head.

James: Cool.

Fiona: What is your favorite book?

[13:01] FIONA: One Soul by Ray Fawkes.

Fiona: What are you reading at the moment?

James: I'm just starting This Census-Taker by China Miéville but I just read Ducks by Kate Beaton.

Fiona: Non-fictional fiction?

James: Both.

Fiona: Favorite genre?

James: Not a genre but a medium, graphic novels.

Fiona: And in the spirit of the Premier's Reading Challenge, how many books do you hope to read in 2023?

James: One billion... 20, 20.

Fiona: Good round answer to aim for.

James: Excellent.

[13:28] Music.

[13:38] Fiona: You've been listening to Between Our Pages of Premier's Reading Challenge WA podcast.

Thanks to our guest James Foley for joining me on this episode.

If you want to keep up to date about future podcast episodes you can follow the Premier's Reading Challenge Facebook, and Instagram pages at Premier's Reading Challenge WA.

Thank you for listening. Happy reading, we'll see you next time!

[13:57] Music.