Questions and Answers with Author Jude Watson

How does writing for a multi-platform series like CAHILLS VS VESPERS differ from writing for more traditional series?

Just to totally confuse you, I’m going to answer “not much” and “a lot.” Not much, because when I sit down to outline the story, I’m thinking of plot, characters, thrilling escapes, emotional highs and lows… all the story elements I always think of. But I’m also mindful of the fact that the readers are partners in solving mysteries and clues. I don’t specifically tie scenes to the cards or the missions-- we have an amazing crew at Scholastic who are brainiacs on that kind of thing. I do think about the fact that some readers are combing the text for clues, so from time to time I might chortle and rub my hands together when I think of something particularly dastardly or mystifying to fold into the story. And that turns out to be a very fun element of writing the books.

You wrote two books for THE 39 CLUES. What was it like returning to that world for A KING’S RANSOM? Was it hard to get back into Amy and Dan’s heads?

Not hard at all. Amy and Dan are so real to me. I also had a head start, because my contribution to VESPERS RISING dealt with Amy and Dan’s life in Boston after the clue hunt—and what happens when they tangle with the Vespers for the first time. I also crafted the arc of CAHILLS VS VESPERS, so I spent a lot of time thinking about how those near-death experiences and betrayals from the clue hunt would change them—as well as what strengths they would have gathered along the way.

The mystery in A KING’S RANSOM involves a lot of world war II history. Was it hard to figure out what information would be best to share with younger readers?

I didn’t go into the complete history of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. That’s better left to history class, other books, and parents. I touched on it, and as in all the 39 Clues books, readers who are interested in the topic can research further. I focused on the fact that there was an actual bureaucratic apparatus to house and catalogue stolen artwork. After the Allied invasion, as the end of the war became clear, these artworks were transported and hidden around Europe in the most surprising places.

What sort of research did you do for this book?

I love doing research for these books. First, geography: I get to travel to fabulous cities and use Google Earth and YouTube to get a feeling of what it’s really like to take a train from Italy to Switzerland, or drive through the Bavarian Alps, or figure out where it would be fun to stage a chase scene in Lucerne. And then I get to investigate fascinating characters like the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. Rumors still swirl on his cause of death, over four hundred years later. And then it’s just plain fun to peruse Czech pastry and decide which one would tempt Dan the most.

What is the most fun part about working on The 39 Clues?

Without question, it is meeting and interacting with the readers. I have been constantly amazed
at how smart they are and how much they identify with characters in the books.

Amy and Dan are on a global chase to stop a dangerous enemy from taking over the world. What is it about this challenge that you think resonates for so many readers?

Amy and Dan use intelligence and are cunning, but also physical prowess and athleticism. They study and research as well as rely on instinct. They need emotional fortitude as well. The challenge just tests every human muscle.

We're at the beginning of the challenge, so right now the stakes are personal—the Vespers are holding Cahills hostage, people Amy and Dan care about very much. With every book, the stakes get higher-- Amy and Dan realize that they are dealing with a group capable of incredible ruthlessness—so how far will they go? What is their ultimate goal? I don't want to give anything away, but when the tension is that high, it resonates with our deepest fears.

What's it like working on a 39 Clues book when there's a genuine fan in the house—your daughter? Does she ever give you suggestions?

It definitely makes it more fun. My daughter gobbled up THE MEDUSA PLOT. I nervously asked her if it was as good as the 39 Clues, and when she said, "It's BETTER!" I relaxed. And, no suggestions, but we have done research together. For example, she came along with me when I went to the library to research Amelia Earhart for IN TOO DEEP. We each took out several books, and took turns telling each other interesting facts about her. Also, I'm not sure she's forgiven me for Irina's fate in IN TOO DEEP...