

BOOKS

Daniel Handler, Author of the A Series Of Unfortunate Events Books, Reveals Why His New Book Is So Different

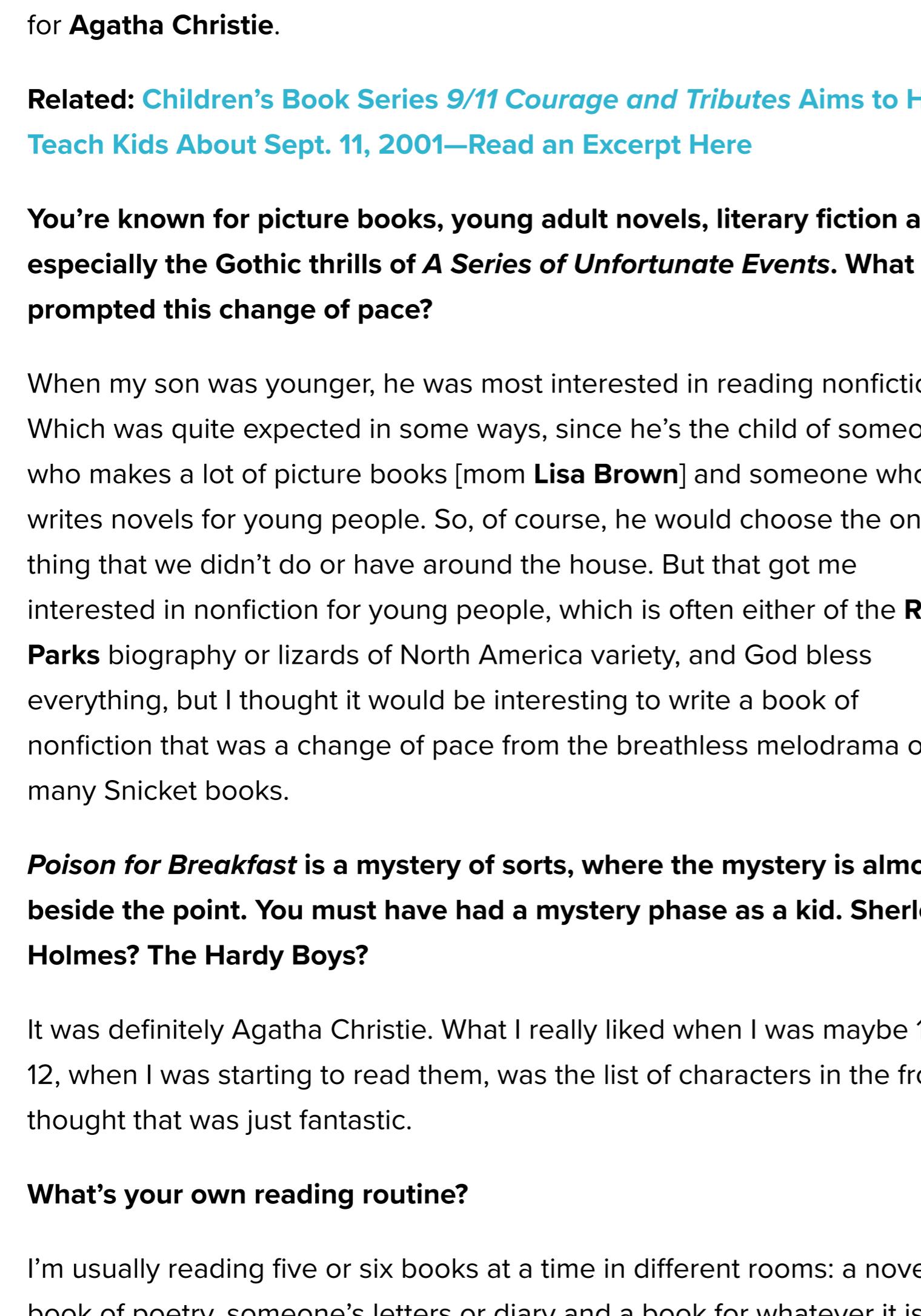
AUGUST 21, 2021 – 5:00 AM – 0 COMMENTS



2



By MICHAEL GITZ



(Meredith Heuer)

Daniel Handler—aka Lemony Snicket, author of the blockbuster *A Series Of Unfortunate Events* books—returns with *Poison for Breakfast* (August 31, Liveright), a stand-alone adventure filled with mystery, musings on life and an apparent culinary crime. In what's passed off as a true tale, Snicket tells the story of finding a note claiming he's eaten poison for breakfast, and what follows is a fantastical quest to discover who did the dastardly deed. "It's the kind of book that might provide you solace when your life is exciting rather than the kind of book that provides you excitement when your life is dull," Handler says. Here, we catch up with the author, who, not surprisingly, had a childhood penchant for Agatha Christie.

Related: Children's Book Series 9/11 Courage and Tributes Aims to Help Teach Kids About Sept. 11, 2001—Read an Excerpt Here

You're known for picture books, young adult novels, literary fiction and especially the Gothic thrills of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. What prompted this change of pace?

When my son was younger, he was most interested in reading nonfiction. Which was quite expected in some ways, since he's the child of someone who makes a lot of picture books [mom Lisa Brown] and someone who writes novels for young people. So, of course, he would choose the one thing that we didn't do or have around the house. But that got me interested in nonfiction for young people, which is often either the Rosa Parks biography or lizards of North America variety, and God bless everything, but I thought it would be interesting to write a book of nonfiction that was a change of pace from the breathless melodrama of so many Snicket books.

Poison for Breakfast is a mystery of sorts, where the mystery is almost beside the point. You must have had a mystery phase as a kid. **Sherlock Holmes? The Hardy Boys?**

It was definitely Agatha Christie. What I really liked when I was maybe 11 or 12, when I was starting to read them, was the list of characters in the front. I thought that was just fantastic.

What's your own reading routine?

I'm usually reading five or six books at a time in different rooms: a novel, a book of poetry, someone's letters or diary and a book for whatever it is that I'm researching. And then usually one more that just came into my house and was so good that I had to start reading it—I keep that one on my kitchen counter.

If you had to choose: library or a bookstore?

One of the delights of my life is that I really don't have to choose. But I like a library because you can really take anything off the shelves and look at it. To make a huge, messy pile of books that not only are you not wanting to purchase, but you're not even going to read all of them. And you're certainly not gonna read all of all of them! When some idea has taken hold of you, you can begin to explore it and serendipity can guide you. So I think I would have to choose a library. But I really love not choosing.

You've talked about arranging a club to read Proust together in dive bars. Has that happened yet?

No, but during the pandemic, I did have a two-person Reading Out Loud Epic Poetry Whilst Drinking Whiskey on Zoom Club. We started with Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey*. We also read the Seamus Heaney Beowulf, Gilgamesh, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Louis MacNeice's Autumn Journal. Now we are embarking on *The Tale of the Heike*, which is so long that we hope it will take us until Emily Wilson finishes her translation of *The Iliad*.

What I like about poetry is that booksellers can't decide if it's fiction or nonfiction. Poetry is just ... poetry.

Well, it's interesting that you would say that, because when my son was interested in reading nonfiction, he would ask all the time, "Is this nonfiction or fiction?" And once, he came upon me reading a book of poetry in the living room. And he said, "Is that fiction, or nonfiction?" Without answering I said, "It's neither," which had never occurred to either of us. And we both sat there, silent, in this kind of amazed moment. I said, if you want to try poetry, here's where the poetry is in our house. You can read any book you want. And he took down *Lunch Poems* [by Frank O'Hara], I think because of the size of the book that you can grab it. I really don't think he understood a word of it, but he just liked the idea that there was something that wasn't either fiction or nonfiction.

You've said that the first book you bought was *The Blue Aspic* by Edward Gorey, which is set in the world of the opera. Were you already singing when you bought that?

Yes, I was. In fact, I bought that book on a break from an opera rehearsal. We walked up to A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books [in San Francisco], which was just a couple of blocks from where we rehearsed.

Were you good enough a singer to say, "Should I become a castrato?"

My parents used to joke that they considered castration to extend my career. But in the long run I'm grateful for my secondary sex characteristics.

You said you bought the Edward Gorey, a major influence of yours, with your own money. But you were only 8 years old! Where did the money come from?

That's more like a family joke. We would get an allowance and then we would say, "Hey, I'm buying this with my own money." My parents never liked to tie specific chores to a specific allowance. The idea was that when they asked us to do something, we should do it. Tremendously unfair. And of course, it's exactly how I'm raising my own child.

What are you reading now?

I'm reading *Dead Souls* by Sam Riviere; Dorothea Lasky's book *Animal*, which is about writing a little bit; and Hillary Leichter's *Temporary*. And it's kind of a reread, but I'm reading the selected poems of James Schuyler. He's a good walking-around poet.

What is Lemony Snicket reading right now?

What is Mr. Snicket reading? Well, I'm working on another Snicket project [for the stage, although it's not a theatrical adaptation of *A Series Of Unfortunate Events*], and for that I'm using this chap book by Magdalena Zurawski, which is called *Being Human Is an Occult Practice*.

What books are you recommending right now?

The Kids of Cattywampus Street [Anne Schwartz Books, by Lisa Jahn-Clough, following the mischievous adventures of kids who live on the same street]. This is probably the last middle grade book I read that I really, really loved.

Jackpot [Ember, by Nic Stone, in which a high school senior juggles school, work and caring for her younger brother]. In terms of [young adult fiction], I think the author doing the best job right now is Nic Stone—the way that she talks about class is really interesting.

A Swim in a Pond in the Rain [Random House, a collection of essays and Russian short stories by George Saunders]. I don't know why I haven't bought it yet. I've picked it up in various bookstores and put it back down. I always feel the book smirking at me, like, "OK, not today, but you're obviously taking me home."

You share your passion for everything from the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop to the children's book *The Long Secret* by Louise Fitzhugh. Have you always loved recommending things to others?

It can be tricky. When I lived in New York, I used to go to a record store; I think it was House of Records on the way to Film Forum. There was a man who ran it, and I would say, "So what's good?" He would offer me something, and if it wasn't up my alley, he took it very hard if I put it down. Oftentimes, it would be a box set of psychedelic rock from the '70s or something. I have wide tastes, but not universal tastes. It would be difficult to say to him, "But I don't think I want this Soft Machine live album. I'm sorry."

Next, Authors Chelsea Clinton, Hilary Duff, Meena Harris and More Reflect on the Value of Children's Books



Parade Daily Celebrity interviews, recipes and health tips delivered to your inbox.

SIGN UP

**Parade Daily**

Celebrity interviews, recipes and health tips delivered to your inbox.

Email Address

SIGN UP

**Everything We Know So Far About America's Got Talent Season 16, Including All the Golden Buzzers**

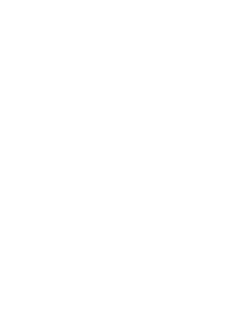
PAULETTE COHN, EDITOR

**Everything to Know About Big Brother 23 (Including Who's Been Evicted)**

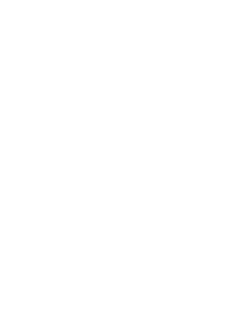
MIKE BLOOM, CONTRIBUTOR

**Which One of These 100 Diets Could Help You Lose Weight? We've Got Tons of Info to Help You Decide**

NANCY HENDERSON, CONTRIBUTOR

**200 Best Crock Pot Recipes and Easy Slow Cooker Dinner Ideas for the Family**

PARADE, EDITOR

**100+ Weight Watchers Recipes With WW Points to Help You Lose Weight**

PARADE, EDITOR

**30 Low-Maintenance Dog Breeds for First-Time or Busy Pup Owners**

MARYLIN LILES, CONTRIBUTOR

**Are People Heavy to Horses?**

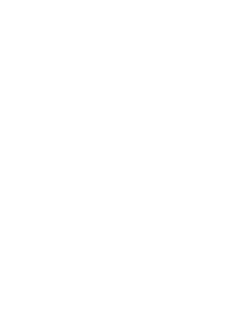
MARILYN VOS SAVANT, CONTRIBUTOR

**Betty White's Lifetime Christmas Movie May Not Happen for 2021**

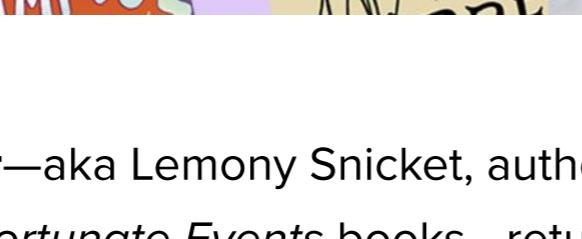
PAULETTE COHN, EDITOR

**Numbrix 9 - August 22**

MARILYN VOS SAVANT, CONTRIBUTOR

**Candace Cameron Bure on Her 17th Aurora Teagarden Mysteries Movie and What She Learned from Aurora**

WALTER SCOTT, EDITOR



2



By MICHAEL GITZ

Leave A Comment

Leave A Comment