

BOOKS

REVIEW

Troubled narrative

Troubled Blood
Robert Galbraith
Mulholland

BILL SHEEHAN

In an afterword to 2015’s Career of Evil, J.K. Rowling says Robert Galbraith, her fictional alter ego, “has always felt like my own private playground.” On the evidence of Troubled Blood, the fifth and latest Galbraith novel, that playground has grown deeper and bigger than ever. At more than 900 pages, it is the longest, most ambitious Galbraith novel to date. It is also the focus of a controversy that seems likely to divide potential readers.

Rowling has created a creepy serial killer who dresses in women’s clothes to more easily reel in his female victims. That decision has generated considerable outrage in light of comments Rowling has made that angered transgender rights activists.

Is this creation a legitimate esthetic choice or is it an affront to the LGBTQ community? While I don’t pretend to know the author’s motivations, I lean toward calling it legitimate. Many others will no doubt passionately disagree.

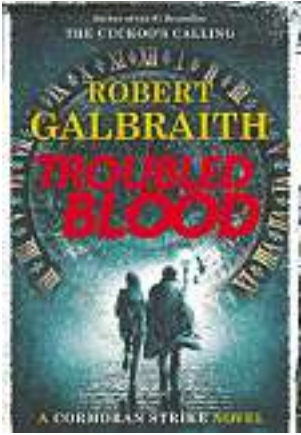
This once again features Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacott, partners in a London-based detective agency. Strike is a former military policeman who lost a leg while serving in Afghanistan. Ellacott, we learn, is an emotionally scarred young woman with an affinity for the peculiar satisfactions of detective work. They have solved high-profile cases but have yet to resolve their complex feelings for each other. During a visit to his childhood home in Cornwall, Strike agrees to look into a decades-old mystery.

Nearly 40 years before, a local doctor named Margot Bamborough had left work and walked in the direction of a nearby pub, where she planned to meet a female friend for drinks. She never arrived. No body was found, and no clues ever surfaced. Strike learns the bare facts of the case from Margot’s surviving daughter, Anna.

The investigation that follows is the centrepiece of a wide-ranging novel filled with enough characters, incidents and alternating storylines to justify its exorbitant length.

Controversies aside, Rowling remains a rare, natural, confident storyteller. For more than one reason, this will surely be among the most widely read — and widely debated — novels of the season. Let the arguments begin.

The Washington Post



Jon Klassen’s images complement Amy Timberlake’s words to tell the story of two unlikely roommates in Skunk and Badger. PHOTOS: HARPERCOLLINS

BOOKS FOR KIDS

ANIMAL CHEMISTRY

Old-fashioned read-aloud fable seems right for the times, **Bernie Goedhart** writes.

Skunk and Badger
Amy Timberlake
Illustrated by Jon Klassen
HarperCollins
Ages 8 to 88

We’ve all been told not to judge a book by its cover, and usually that’s good advice. But in the case of Skunk and Badger it couldn’t be more wrong.

The cover illustration by Canadian artist Jon Klassen speaks volumes, and is a perfect representation of author Amy Timberlake’s introductory sentences in this novel, released this month as the first volume of what is destined to be a series of three middle-grade books. “The first time Badger saw Skunk he thought, puny, and shut the front door,” Timberlake writes. “Badger didn’t normally shut the door on animals that knocked. But there was too much slick in this one’s stripe, too much puff in his tail. Also, there’d been that grin, and the way he’d stuck out his paw as if he had been looking forward to meeting Badger for a long, long time.”

There they are on the cover: Badger at the door of his brownstone home and a toothy Skunk, paw outstretched, on the stoop with a red suitcase by his side, looking like the oily salesman Badger mistakenly assumes him to be. What follows is a story of two very different characters, thrown together by circumstance not of their own making and forced, in the end, to coexist as roommates. I was hooked by the cover and Timberlake’s introduction, and as soon as I finished my first reading of this 126-page book I went back to page 1 and started over again for sheer pleasure. I’ve now read the book (including the author’s acknowledgments at the end) six times and have every intention of doing so again while I wait for the second book in the series.

Skunk and Badger is the story of a solemn, somewhat uptight rock scientist whose life revolves around his Important Rock Work. Thanks to the kindness of his Aunt Lula, a pine marten who offered him her brownstone three years earlier so he’d have someplace to live and work, Badger has all the space he needs for his rock collection and all the quiet needed so he can focus on those rocks. But now it seems Aunt Lula has extended the same kindness to Skunk, believing that her nephew will get along fine with the cheerful, gregarious animal who is the antithesis of grumpy, solitary Badger. Forced to admit that the absent Aunt Lula calls the shots as far as the brownstone is concerned, Badger grudgingly opens the door to Skunk and tries to make

the best of what he views as a bad situation. And that’s before he discovers Skunk’s abiding friendship with chickens, and the complications that ensue when a stoat tries to deliver a telegram.

During a recent interview from her home in Chicago, Timberlake said the book, which took her about three years to write, emerged after she “got stuck” while working on a volume that was meant to follow her 2013 novel One Came Home, which was named a Newbery Honor Book and won the Edgar Award for best juvenile mystery. In doing research for the new project, “I read all these classic bear stories,” she said, including Winnie the Pooh, “but my mind kept wandering away from the other project.” Instead, Timberlake began thinking about writing a story in the style of A.A. Milne. Skunk and Badger began to take shape.

“The challenge I had set myself was to explore different genres — to write a buddy story. I wanted two animals to come together despite their differences,” the author said, “and I wanted to write an old-fashioned read-aloud like A.A. Milne, which was episodic.”

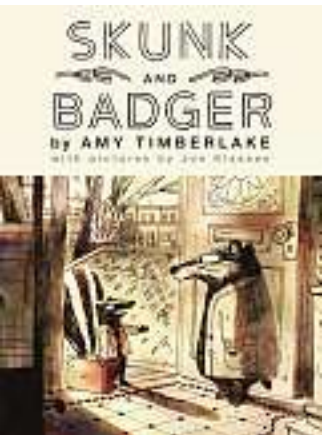
Unsure whether such a book would be marketable today, she nevertheless found the characters “really funny, and the daily amusement kept me going. I wrote two chapters and sent it off to my agent, Steven Malk.” He encouraged her to keep writing — “to finish this one” instead of returning to the ill-fated earlier project. When she sent Malk the

completed Skunk and Badger manuscript, he brought up the name of another of his clients. “He said: What do you think about Jon Klassen (as illustrator)? To me, it sounded like asking for the stars.”

Timberlake said she went back and looked at some of Klassen’s books. “His sense of timing, the way he turns pages, is just spot on.” And clearly, he shared her view of Skunk and Badger as an old-fashioned read-aloud storybook, because “he sent a picture from Wind in the Willows — Toad in a car, in tip-in art” with the suggestion that tip-in plates be part of Skunk and Badger, as well. The U.S. publisher, Algonquin Young Readers, agreed: In addition to regular full-page and spot black-and-white illustrations, the book has four full-colour tip-in plates on glossy paper (a tip-in plate is printed separately, then bound in with the book).

Born in Winnipeg and raised in Ontario, Klassen studied animation at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ont., and moved to the U.S. in 2005 to work for DreamWorks. His first picture book, Cats’ Night Out by Caroline Stutson, was published in 2010 and earned him a Governor General’s Literary Award for illustration. These days, Klassen works in books more than film. One of the picture books he both wrote and illustrated, This Is Not My Hat, published in 2012, earned him the U.S. Caldecott Medal and the British Kate Greenaway Medal. In 2018, he was named to the Order of Canada “for his transformative contributions to children’s literature.”

When his agent gave him the manuscript for Skunk and Badger, Klassen was immediately



Amy Timberlake



Jon Klassen

taken with it. “It sounds so much like what I loved as a kid at that age,” he said of the story. “It has such a singular voice, and a really definable place. I knew I could do some pretty atmospheric and cosy drawings.”

Aunt Lula’s brownstone figures prominently throughout the book, and Klassen says he was “born in a house like that in Winnipeg. I grew up in an old house.” In depicting Skunk and Badger in the brownstone, he has drawn things in scale. For example, when they’re sitting at a table eating breakfast, their feet don’t touch the floor. “The rooms in such houses are small and high,” Klassen said.

“Light doesn’t reach all the corners. Everything’s got shadows in it.” But that doesn’t mean the images are scary, he said, noting that in his art he has “always tried to recast black. I don’t think it has to be full of dread. It can be atmospheric.”

Given these COVID-19 times, author and illustrator still haven’t met in person. “We’ve had a Zoom call,” said Timberlake, who sees their book very much as a joint project. “I trust him,” she said. “It’s super fun to work with him. In the next book, there’s some stuff that makes me laugh out loud and I think to myself: How’s Jon going to illustrate this?”

Klassen, for his part, said the author could have taken the stressful times we’re living in and turned the book into something cloyingly sweet, or something post-apocalyptic.

“But Amy is too good for that,” he said. “She’s sincere. She plays it straight. This book is completely self-contained. It didn’t feel derivative of anything.”

Still, he said, “I’m really glad people are making books like this at a time like this.”



Badger has plenty of room for “Important Rock Work” in his aunt’s home.