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## NICK EARLS & BEC SPARROW

### How did your tandem story project *Joel & Cat Set the Story Straight* come about?

BS: Nick and I have a similar sense of humour and it always seemed to me that one day we would get together and write something. A few years ago when I was sitting on Nick's back deck, one of us actually flagged the idea of writing a "he said/she said" novel but we always agreed that we'd only do so if the right type of storyline came along.

NE: In January 2006, out of the blue, my mother forwarded me an email between two US college students required to write a tandem story together. It may be bogus but it was pretty funny – her character pondered and made a cup of tea, his blew up the earth. I emailed it to Bec. Right away we both knew this was it. We'd write from two points of view – from two high school tandem-story writers. We'd write alternating chapters, with each one ending with that day's piece of tandem story by our characters.



### At what point did you think working together might've been a mistake?

BS: Just yesterday when Nick didn't go for my idea of my name appearing in 72 point font and his name appearing in 10 point font on the front cover. I even offered him "comic sans" but he didn't go for it.

NE: Before we started, my partner Sarah had big reservations about it, because she knows I'm a control freak. She told me not to be mean to Bec, and that I actually couldn't go ahead until I'd called Bec and told her I officially wasn't in charge.

### And when did you decide that, actually, it would be a great thing?

BS: Pretty much straight away when I read Nick's first chapter. The dialogue between Joel and Luke is just so funny that I alternatively loved his chapters and hated them for setting the benchmark so high.

NE: We were trying to work out how Joel could head off a potential date between his mother and Cat's father. We tried the idea of Joel faking appendicitis, and when I thought through the medicine of that, I realised how the consultation would end – and it's not pretty. Suddenly I so wanted to write that scene! When Bec's return chapter arrived, and I read what Cat's brother did with his Batman and Harry Potter action figures, I laughed more than I had in ages. It was very funny, but also a very clever piece of storytelling.



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**Did either of you make the other's characters do something that you wouldn't have expected them to do?**

BS: I guess I was surprised at how Joel was viewing Cat early on in the novel. I pictured Cat as empathetic, generous and ambitious, but Joel pretty much just saw her as a toad. This irritated me a bit. So in our tandem story I cut off his character's tongue.

NE: When it came to Cat and Joel's tandem story, the appropriate response was revenge. Bec got me early on when Cat killed Joel's character – and cut off his tongue – but Joel had watched more than enough movies to know that wasn't the end. Plus, it couldn't be – his character was packing heaps of weapons Joel hadn't even mentioned yet. Once the latex death costume was off, he was set to wreak havoc.



**How did you find working with each other?**

BS: Surprisingly easy. It never really felt like work – which is a wonderful thing. Of course, the tandem story aspect meant that I, like Cat, obsessed with screwing up Nick and Joel's story. I can't believe he wrote around me cutting out his character's tongue.

NE: It was everything I expected. I was timely in my delivery; Bec would leave messages each fortnight explaining why she was a bit behind. (Okay, to be fair, she had a book out at the time, plenty of other things on too, blah blah, and I had nothing to do but plan my next chapter).

**Something you didn't know about each other before writing the book together...**

BS: Just how bloody efficient Nick is. When he says he'll have a chapter written in two days, he actually means it. I also didn't know we share a fondness for Sizzler cheese toast.

NE: I didn't know how hard Bec would work during the editing process, or how much she would actually write then. She came up with large amounts of new material and even tricked me into writing one more chapter than her!

**When you think of each other you ...**

BS: think of our eight year friendship and of how it all began with an interview in a Thai restaurant.

NE: wish Brad (Bec's husband) luck.



***Joel & Cat Set the Story Straight* by Nick Earls & Bec Sparrow, Penguin, August 2007, rrp \$19.95**

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