



### **Maggot Moon**

Written by Sally Gardner

Illustrated by Julian Crouch

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*Maggot Moon* represents a rare genre, a young adult novel that blends history with speculative fiction. While the book has often been labeled a dystopia, Gardner shares that she never thought she was writing a dystopia, but rather, a “what if?” story. While researching World War II for another book, she became fascinated by “what if” questions of life and history. *Maggot Moon* grew out of two such compelling questions: What if the Allies had not won WWII, and what if no one had been to the moon yet? In Gardner’s alternative history set in London in the 1950’s, the Motherland is a ruthless

regime resolutely determined to win against its enemies in a race to the moon.

Set against a backdrop of brutality, a 15-year-old boy whose exceptional ability to think outside the box is in a unique position to challenge the government’s tyranny. Standish Treadwell and his grandfather live with the outcasts in Zone 7. When his best friend disappears, Standish embarks on a quest to find him, one that takes him to the heart of the Motherland and the dangerous secret it guards with violence and propaganda. Gardner’s story is a chilling and gripping account of one individual’s endeavor to stand up to an all-powerful regime. The narrative is so compelling and believable that I frequently had to remind myself that I was not reading historical fiction.

Standish is an anti-hero with dyslexia—he can neither read nor write. Because he is incapable of writing his story, he must tell it to the reader. Gardner shares that she used a disjointed style of writing to try and mirror the kind of back-and-forward thinking that goes on in one’s head in the attempt to recount a story. Sally Gardner states that she has dyslexia and did not read until she was 14-years-old.

*Maggot Moon* is organized into 100 very short chapters that span only one, two or three pages. This design was intentional on the part of the author. Gardner wished to make the book accessible to dyslexic readers because she remembers feeling terrified of books with long chapters. She always felt a great sense of achievement when she got to the end of the first chapter, so she made the opening chapter of the book only seven lines long. Gardner’s advocacy for students who exist on the margins of school is reflected in the book’s dedication: For you the dreamers/Overlooked at school/Never won prizes/You who will own tomorrow.

Julian Crouch created the digital illustrations for *Maggot Moon*. Designed like a flip-book, the figure of a rat appears throughout much of the book, seen moving in and out of a hole at the bottom of the page. At one point, the rat discovers a bottle of poison, drinks it, and dies. A fly then lays eggs in the rat’s mouth. Eventually all that is left is a skeleton of wriggling

maggots, from which one lone fly hatches and flies away on the last page of the book. This grisly scene of death and decay draws eerie and disturbing parallels to the plot and themes found within Gardner's text. This is not a book to finish in public. While the ending is satisfying and hopeful, it is also tragic and heartbreaking.

Sally Gardner won the 2013 Carnegie Medal, which is awarded annually in the United Kingdom to the writer of an outstanding book for children. *Maggot Moon* was originally published in the UK in 2012 by Hot Key Books. The UK's most prestigious children's book awards are the Carnegie Medal for outstanding writing and the Kate Greenaway Medal for distinguished illustration, awarded by CILIP (The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). The Carnegie Medal was established in 1936 and named in memory of Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish-American industrialist-turned-philanthropist who established more than 2800 libraries around the world. Books from English-speaking countries outside of the UK are eligible for the awards, as long as they are co-published in the UK within three months of their original publication date.

According to the award criteria, the winning book must exemplify outstanding literary quality. In describing the ideal winning book, the award criteria page on the CILIP website (<http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/home/index.php>) states: The whole work should provide pleasure, not merely from the surface enjoyment of a good read, but also the deeper subconscious satisfaction of having gone through a vicarious, but at the time of reading, a real experience that is retained afterwards. The criteria also specify quality in attributes of three literary elements: plot, characterization, and style. The U.S.'s equivalent award, the Newbery Medal, also considers these elements, as well as theme, presentation of information, and setting.

Readers who wish to participate in a mock-award process may visit CILIP's Shadowing Site (<http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/shadowingsite/index.php>), which offers a wide array of free resources and shadowing activities. Participants may join book groups that read and discuss the shortlisted books for the two medals, view videos of the authors and illustrators talking about their books, and read and post book reviews. Over 1,500 reviews of *Maggot Moon* have been posted on the site thus far. Sally Gardner is featured in twelve short video clips (<http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/shadowingsite/watch.php> authorid 3) in which she answers questions and offers advice for young writers. In fact, much of the information for this review came from these captivating and informative interviews.

*Maggot Moon* has its own website where readers may download a preview of the book and a book poster, listen to an extract of the audio book, learn about the book's background and author, access a discussion guide designed to spark conversation, and sample the *Maggot Moon* interactive iBook. This enhanced multi-touch iBook contains a variety of engaging content, from video and audio clips to interviews with the author and resources about dyslexia. The iBook uses a dyslexic-friendly font, and it shows readers an animation of what writing looks like to a person with dyslexia. Readers can actually experience what Sally Gardner sees when she looks at words.

*The Book of everything*, by Dutch author Guus Kuijer (2006), is the perfect book to pair with *Maggot Moon*. Thomas, the book's protagonist, has visions of things that other people cannot

see, and he records these in his Book of everything. Thomas' goal in life is to find happiness when he grows up, but happiness is elusive in a home oppressed by his abusive father. Both books are suitable for those who enjoy the challenge of a genre-bending reading experience. Each story contains elements of speculative fiction the line between what is real and what is imagined is blurred. It could be quite interesting to compare and contrast the protagonists: Standish stands up to the tyrannical Motherland for the sake of his family and friend, and Thomas stands up to his tyrannical father for the sake of his mother and sister. Both books contain brave and complex characters, as well as powerful themes of secrets and sacrifice.

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