



Touching Base

with Paul Kropp

by Adrienne Phillips

How did you start your career as a writer?

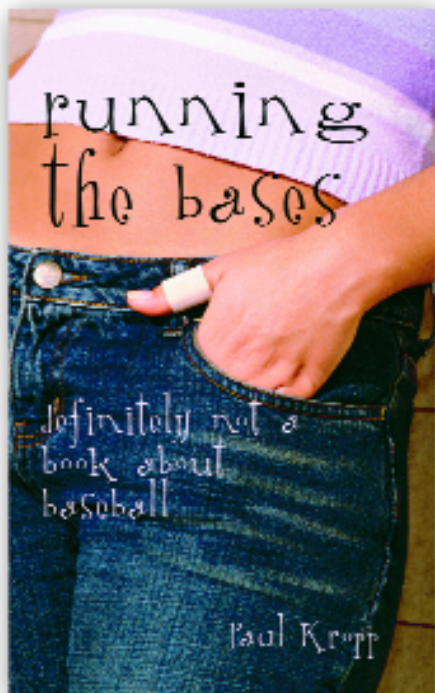
I began writing for Mrs. Brown in my Grade 1 class. At the time, we had to illustrate our stories and the only thing I could draw was B-52 bombers and explosions. Mrs. Brown looked at my stories, shook her head and told me that I'd never be a writer. For fifty years now, I've been proving her wrong on the writing—though I still can't draw much more than B-52 bombers and explosions.

If you weren't writing, what might you be doing for a living?

I could be a teacher, and did that for more than twenty years, but I'd really like to be a professional croquet player. Unfortunately, there are no professional croquet players and my current standing in CroCan suggests that I won't be the first.

As a reader, what do you like? As a writer, has a book or author particularly influenced you? Is there any book you really wish you'd written?

I read very widely, from non-fiction like Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* to fiction by John Irving and Michael Ondaatje. Among young adult writers, I admire William Bell



Running the Bases is prolific Canadian writer Paul Kropp's latest novel for teen readers. It's the hilarious story of the dating misadventures of Alan Macklin, a 17-year-old guy with one simple goal: to get a girl. But when it comes to the opposite sex, Alan just keeps striking out. For some much-needed help he turns to Maggie McPherson, who, for a fee, takes on the Alan project and coaches him from girl to girl, base to base, with surprising and comical results. *READ* magazine talked to Paul Kropp from his home in Regina, Saskatchewan.

and Susan Juby. For many years, my young-adult writing was heavily influenced by the American writer Paul Zindel. But Zindel died a few years back and I'm moving into new territory. And as for books I wanted to write . . . well, I've written them.

You've written extensively in both the fiction and non-fiction genres. Is your writing process different for fiction and non-fiction?

Fiction is tougher. For non-fiction, there's a big research phase that takes years, followed by a writing phase that is difficult, but not impossible because the material is in my head. For fiction, a story starts as an idea but that idea morphs a great deal as I do the actual writing. For *Running the Bases*, I didn't realize how important Maggie was until I was a third of the way into the first draft. I didn't know she'd be billing Alan for advice until I was finished that draft. It takes a long time for a writer to understand his or her characters, and that affects the story. *Running the Bases*, for instance, has eight revised drafts on my computer. Non-fiction never takes that much rewriting.

We've heard that showers play an important role in

your writing process. Can you tell us a little about that?

When I get stuck in writing (everybody does), I don't complain or crumple up paper . . . I take a shower. Technically, the ionization around the showerhead frees up negative ions that have a positive effect on creativity. It's a bit like being outside in a thunderstorm, except there's no danger of lightning. (Caution: do not take a computer into the shower. Take my word for it.)

You've previously written over 50 novels for young people. What made you want to tell this particular story now?

I think dating, romance and adolescent sexuality (note, I did not say sex) are big topics for teenagers, and mostly ignored in these days of adventure books and fantasy. That field of dating and romance changes radically every few years. I looked at it first, with younger characters, back in 1978 . . . and some time has passed since then. I wanted to take another honest look before I get too old to hit the keyboard and my kids and assistants get too old to tell me the truth.

***Running the Bases* deals honestly with the challenges and pressures teenagers feel around dating and**

sexuality. Do you think these pressures are different from the ones you faced as a teenager?

Those challenges are radically different. I go back to the days when perfumes smelled like Ivory Soap, a girl's navel was never seen in real life and was airbrushed out of magazine pictures, and you had to go on two dates before you got a kiss on the cheek. "Hooking up" was an aspect of needlework or knitting. I'm not sure that all the current trends are good things for teenagers, but there's no sense denying the real world they face.

Maggie starts off as Alan's Project Manager and eventually becomes something else entirely to him. Did you know from the start that things would change between them, or was that plot twist a surprise to you as you wrote the book?

I knew that Maggie and Alan had an attraction for each other early on, but Alan is attracted to almost any girl and Maggie has standards that Alan doesn't meet. I was actually surprised that Maggie should become interested in Alan at the book's end. Characters sometimes do the darndest things. If Maggie had asked me, I would have given her better advice.

In *Running the Bases* you present a guy's view on dating as well as a no-nonsense girl's perspective on the same thing—where did the inspiration for that come from?

I've been experimenting with two points-of-view in fiction since the 1980s. This book is "told" by Alan, but the real substance comes from Maggie because my poor hero is such an idiot. I think he's a likeable idiot (as does Maggie) but he's still very clueless. Fortunately, Maggie has enough brains for them both.

Do you have kids of your own? Do you consult them when you're writing about teenagers?

I have three boys and a step-daughter. My youngest son and step-daughter are young enough (25, 20) that they offer me much good advice. My first attempt at ending the book,

for instance, was rejected out-of-hand by my son Alex, who is also a writer. "Your characters wouldn't do that," he said, and then told me why. So I went back and rewrote. They both approve of the revised ending.

What's next for Alan and Maggie? Are you planning to tell us more of their story in future books?

I could tell you a great deal, but let me just say this: Alan and Maggie end up in schools on either sides of the country. Alan continues his quest for a girl, some girl, any girl (like Tom Jones, he never quite succeeds) and Maggie suffers from some real abuse at her prestigious school in the East. They compare notes after their first year, but as very different people than they were in high school.

What's the most valuable piece of advice you'd give to a new writer?

Listen hard to real kids, not to other writers. There are stories desperate to be written and few people with the courage to write them.

What's the most valuable piece of advice you'd give to a parent hoping to encourage their child to read?

Buy tons of reading material: books, magazines, schlocky books, pop novels, classics, comics and the *Guinness Book of Records*. Don't turn up your nose at anything, but make sure there's good stuff close by your child's

reading corner.

Is there a question we haven't asked that you'd love to answer?

People ask if I ever write myself into my books, and the simple answer is: All the time—but not in any recognizable way. There are parts of me in both Alan and Maggie, in Scrooge and Jeremy, and bits of my life experience in all my books. But the kind, wise, terrifically handsome father . . . well, there's just no room for him. **R**



Visit www.ReadMagazine.ca

to read an excerpt from *Running the Bases*.



The 3R's
FROM HOW TO MAKE YOUR
CHILD A READER FOR LIFE
BY PAUL KROPP

1. **READ** with your child every day.
2. **REACH** into your wallet to buy books, magazines, and other reading material for your child and yourself.
3. **RULE** the media. Put a reasonable limit on television, video, computer time, and video games so there will be time for reading in your child's life.