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TITLE INFORMATION

Teens Discover the Dark Side of Reality TV. Blue Works, the young adult division of Windstorm Creative, is pleased to announce *The Real Life Channel*, by Robert A. Black, former script writer for *You Can't Do That on Television*.

The teenage cast of *What Do You Think You're Doing* thinks the worst is over when a mysterious representative for the Real Life Channel saves their show from cancellation. But instead of fame and fortune, they find scenes from their private lives are turning up in the show's scripts—and it doesn't end there. As things get weirder and weirder, the cast members wonder what's really going on and whether their so-called knight in shining armor isn't what he seems.

This media kit includes:

Press Release
Author Interview
Study Guide
First-Person Essay
Ordering Information

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PRESS RELEASE

Their Private Conversation was in the Script!

TITLE: The Real Life Channel

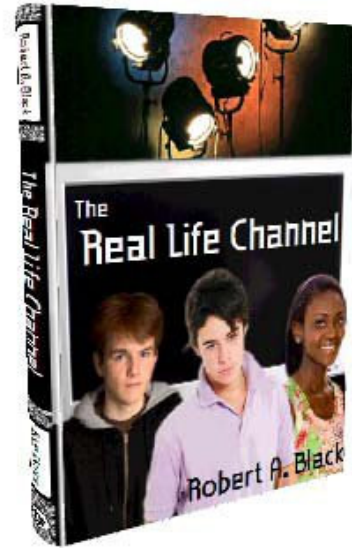
AUTHOR: Robert A. Black

PUBLICATION DATE: 2006

PRICE: \$14.99

PAGE COUNT: 204

ISBN: 9781590921562



DESCRIPTION: The teenage cast members of a small-time TV show think their troubles are over when they are saved from cancellation. But instead of the fame and fortune they are expecting, their lives become strange. Jason Marlow doesn't remember who his friends are; Sydney Myerson-Walsh's parents won't stop arguing over how to manage her career; and Alan Little can't stop his mom from selling his clothes on the Internet! And it all appears to be caused by the network they thought had rescued them. A mysterious network known as The Real Life Channel.

RELEVANCE: With so many popular TV shows blurring the lines between the real world and the TV world, *The Real Life Channel* takes a teen look at what might happen if those worlds overlapped a little too much, while at the same time leading its characters to examine what's really important in their lives.

AUTHOR'S CREDENTIALS: Born and raised in Indianapolis, Robert A. Black sold his first script for the TV series *You Can't Do That On Television* while he was an engineering student at Vanderbilt University. Mr. Black's association with Nickelodeon continued through eight more scripts and a job as an on-set script doctor. He currently lives in Southern California.

PRINT RUN: 10,000

GENRE: Young Adult Fiction

DISTRIBUTION: Ingram, Baker & Taylor, PartnersWest, Midwest Library Service, Brodart, and more as well as directly from the publisher.

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INTERVIEW

Reality Television Becomes a Little *Too* Real

An interview with author Robert A. Black. This interview may be reprinted as a whole or in part. For digital copy of the interview, contact us at legal@windstormcreative.com

I) About the Story

Since you've written a book called *The Real Life Channel*, does that mean you watch a lot of "reality TV?"

Actually, I don't watch any! The roots of this story go back a long way, long before the "reality TV" phenomenon started. When I was a kid, sometimes I'd imagine what it would be like if my life was being covered like an event on TV, with commentators reporting on me doing my paper route or on my choir's performances or things like that. I wrote an earlier version of *The Real Life Channel* about twenty years ago which was a completely different story from this book, but the idea for the network and what it wants are the same.

So what does the Real Life Channel want, if it's not to create the next *Survivor* or *American Idol*?

More than anything else, they want control. It's hard to make a TV show about people in real life, because they don't always do what you expect them to do. Most of the time, just the fact that you've got people in front of a camera will change how they behave. That's when Marcus Bligh started working on his "advanced techniques," as Andrea puts it. And then, if you can control the people who are performing in your shows, why not try to control the people watching your shows as well? Where does it stop? Or you might say that the people at the Real Life Channel asked themselves, "Why does it *need* to stop?"

But isn't it normal for people to want control over things? Are you saying that's bad?

No, of course it's normal. Wouldn't you love to have your own Scriptor 7000 and rewrite your life when you wanted to? Take a look at the kids who make the show, *What Do You Think You're Doing?* They want control in their lives, too. The whole reason they get involved with the Real Life Channel in the first place is because they want to control the fate of their show after it gets put on hiatus. And individually, you have Alan feeling unable to control that he's getting older, Sydney unable to control whether she gets to see her friends at the studio, and others worrying about their own issues. But nobody can control *everything* in life. There are always going to be walls that you run into along the way.

What matters is what you do when you reach those walls. Do you just stop there? Try to go around them? Try to knock them down? The Real Life Channel has its own answer, but the kids still need to find theirs.

You used to write for TV. How much of your TV experience have you put into the book?

I drew from my experience, as any writer does. Well, if the kids represent my favorite memories, I guess the Real Life Channel itself represents my not-so-favorite memories. The TV business can be a rough one, and it really can disconnect you from reality if you're not careful. When you're a screenwriter, you soon discover that there are a lot of people who will change your work for their own purposes. You have very little control over how much of your work will make it into the finished product. That's why I switched to writing books.

So are you saying you have your own need to control things?

Guilty as charged! I *am* a writer, after all. It kind of goes with the territory.

II) About the Author

How did you start writing for television?

When I was a kid, writing for TV was something I'd always said I wanted to do. I read and reread David Gerrold's book, *The Trouble With Tribbles*, which was his account of writing for the original *Star Trek* series when he was a twenty-two-year-old graduate student. But it wasn't until I was halfway through college before I actually tried it. I was studying engineering, and it wasn't really what I thought it would be like. That got me thinking about what else I might want to do with myself. I'd been watching Nickelodeon's *You Can't Do That On Television*, and had been getting some ideas for it—which is what happens with a lot of shows I watch—and I just decided that after wanting to write for so long, it was time that I actually did it.

How did you sell your script once you'd written it?

I was lucky that *You Can't Do That On Television* wasn't made in Hollywood and didn't appear on a broadcast network. That meant I didn't have as much competition for the producers' attention, and I didn't have to worry about finding an agent. But it was still difficult, because they were in Canada and I was in Tennessee, and this was before the internet made long-distance communication so much easier. Once we got in touch with each other, it was mostly a matter of waiting on my end. After four months, I got a definite "maybe"—they asked me to do some rewriting and try again. I didn't hear anything more for another four months, until suddenly one day it all came together.

How long did you work for the show?

About a year and a half. My first four scripts were part of the 1985 season, and I spent that summer working on the set as the "script doctor," rewriting things on the scripts as

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production went along. After that, I went back to Tennessee, but continued to write from there. Unfortunately, by the time I graduated, the show was going on hiatus, so that's where things ended. I wrote a total of nine episodes, and there are about a half-dozen others that have some of my work in them.

What was working on the set like?

I absolutely loved it. First of all, there's nothing like seeing people perform the things that you've written. Second, there was a really great atmosphere on the set. The cast and crew all got along with each other and enjoyed what they were doing. I wasn't that much older than the kids in the cast—and was actually younger than one of them—so I fit right in. There was plenty for me to do besides write, too, whether it was providing one of the offscreen voices or sitting in the background on the set. Once I had to stand behind the school bus set and throw branches into the air, to make it look like the bus was driving through a garden. And my big moment was when I played a “good-looking guy” working at the burger joint where the kids always went. I guess all the real “good-looking guys” were busy that day.

Singer Alanis Morissette has become *You Can't Do That On Television's* best known former cast member. Did you ever work with her?

I met her once, in 1986 on my last visit to the set. I remember being surprised when she told me she was only twelve years old, because she had been hanging around with another cast member who was fourteen, and I'd thought they were the same age. She did appear in one of my episodes, though. In fact, that was the only time she ever got the show's trademark “green slime” dumped on her head.

So does that make you, “The Man Who Slimed Alanis?”

Yup, that's me.

III) About Sydney Myerson-Walsh and her family

Why did you give Sydney Myerson-Walsh the family that she has?

You mean why does she have two dads? The simplest answer is because that's who she is. That's the way the story came together. When I was brainstorming my cast of characters, she just kind of popped into my head and announced, “Hi, I'm Sydney, and these are my dads.” When a character is that definite about something, it's usually a good idea to listen and go with it.

And that's the only reason?

That's how I got started. Once I had the characters established, I made several decisions about what I was going to do with them. One thing I knew from very early in my story development was that I was going to make them as normal a family as I could. I tried to write Tim and Jerry in exactly the same way as I would if they were “Tom” and “Joanne.”

You could say that the whole point to them is that there's no point, or that the most remarkable thing about them is that they're unremarkable.

Do you think that's a realistic portrayal?

Sure, why wouldn't it be? I see families like Sydney's at my church all the time. They're getting their kids baptized, sending them off to Sunday school, arranging child care for them—just like any other parents would do.

So you think including a gay couple is appropriate in a book written for young people.

Absolutely. I think it's important to introduce young readers to different people of *all* types, and to show that just because people are different, that doesn't mean they're scary or threatening. That's why I try to put some diversity into all my casts of characters. Besides, I think it increases the number of potential readers there are who can find someone to relate to in the story, and I think it makes the story more interesting. It's certainly more interesting for me to write that way.

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The Real Life Channel: Study Guide

Table of Contents

About the Author, Robert A. Black

The Inspiration for *The Real Life Channel*

The Story of *The Real Life Channel*

The Characters

Discussion Questions

Topics for Further Research and Discussion

About the Author

Robert A. Black is a former writer for the TV series *You Can't Do That On Television*, which aired on Nickelodeon in the US and CTV in Canada during the 1980s and early 1990s. During the 1985 taping session, he worked on the set as the "script doctor," revising scenes when necessary and also occasionally helping out with the taping. He even appeared on camera a handful of times. In all, he wrote nine complete episodes for the series and contributed to six others. In 1991, one of his episodes was chosen for Nickelodeon's "Kids Pick'Em Friday," a day-long audience request special.

Mr. Black later moved to Southern California and attempted to start a screenwriting career in Hollywood. He eventually switched to writing books because he preferred the greater creative freedom and control it offered. *The Real Life Channel* is his second published novel.

The Inspiration for *The Real Life Channel*

The first version of *The Real Life Channel* was written in 1987 as a script that could be performed either live onstage or in a three-camera TV studio. It was a completely different story from the current novel (Andrea Bligh is the only character in both versions), but just like the novel, it centered around a mysterious TV network that claimed to show real people leading normal lives, but actually manipulated its viewers and performers alike.

The current novel takes the idea of the Real Life Channel and places it in a new setting, inspired by Mr. Black's experience as a writer for *You Can't Do That On Television*.

The Story of *The Real Life Channel*

The Real Life Channel is about a group of teenage actors working on a children's TV comedy called *What Do You Think You're Doing?* It doesn't have the glamour of Hollywood, but it's fun – at least until their network suspends production and threatens to cancel the show.

Some of the kids decide to solve their problem themselves by looking for a new network. One of their targets is the Real Life Channel, a network devoted to reality-based programming. The attempt succeeds beyond their expectations when a network representative offers to give them a new home.

Everyone is excited at first, but their mood changes when strange things begin to happen. People begin to act differently, while small TV cameras start turning up in strange places. Soon all the kids are under the spell, convinced that they are happy doing whatever the network wants them to do. But then the network's influence goes too far, and the kids decide to strike back. They ultimately succeed, and things return to normal. The kids know they're not as likely to become stars, but they'd rather have their normal lives back.

The Characters

Alan Little, *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Charlotte Rakowski *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Brenda Sims *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Sydney Myerson-Walsh, *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Daniel Hoffman, *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Jason Chang, *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Jason Marlow, *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Mary Donohue, *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Paul Morris, adult actor *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Emma Grainger, adult actress and *What Do You Think You're Doing?* cast member

Owen Pernell, *What Do You Think You're Doing?* producer

Ruth Liebman, *What Do You Think You're Doing?* Director

Greg Landsberg, Real Life Channel representative

Jerry Myerson, Sydney's father

Tim Walsh, Sydney's father

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do Charlotte and Brenda want to give up making the show? How does this make Sydney feel? Have you ever given up something you used to like doing when you were younger? Why?

2. Alan's mother has doubts when she first reads the Real Life Channel's contract. Is she being reasonable, or is she worrying too much? (Remember that at this point in the story, nobody knows what the Real Life Channel is planning to do.)
3. Compare the way Sydney first thinks about the Real Life Channel's offer to the way her dads react when they first read the contract. Talk about how these different perspectives help us understand Sydney and her family.
4. Alan receives several warnings before he has to turn in his permission forms, but he goes to turn the forms in anyway. Would you have done the same? Why or why not?
5. The Real Life Channel's audience vote pressures the kids into seeing each other as competitors instead of as friends. How do they react to this? Have you ever been in a similar situation? What did you do?
6. Why do you think Alan's classmates start treating him differently once Andrea tells them he's going to be a star? If you were in Alan's class, would you treat him differently? Why or why not? What would you do if you were in Alan's place?
7. At what point in the story does the Real Life Channel change Alan and Sydney? How can you tell?
8. Alan has doubts about the Real Life Channel almost from the beginning, but he tries to ignore them and push them away harder than anyone else. Why?
9. Why does Alan become angry when he figures out that his fans were manipulated into liking him? If you were Alan, would you be angry or grateful for the attention?
10. What clues might have told Alan, Jason and Sydney that breaking into the Real Life Channel's broadcast center was a trap?
11. Daniel betrays his friends to get the job of Devon's sidekick in *Real Life Renegade*. Why do you think he did that?
12. Marcus Bligh claims that his Scriptor machine brought out things that Alan, Sydney and the others were already feeling and thinking, even if they weren't aware of them. Do you think he's telling the truth? What clues can you find that would prove or disprove his claim?
13. Imagine you're standing in the control room with Alan, Sydney and Jason, and Marcus Bligh gives you the same choice he gave them. What would you choose?
14. When Alan, Sydney and Jason are trying to figure out how to break the Scriptor's hold on people, Sydney feels grateful that Alan and Jason are actors, because it makes them more aware of their feelings than most boys are. Is she being sexist or realistic? What makes you think that way?

15. Imagine Andrea's scene in the conference room from her point of view. Do her attempts to persuade Alan, Sydney and Jason seem reasonable? Why or why not?
16. If Marcus Bligh had been changed by the Scriptor, just like everybody else, then who – or what – do you think was really in charge of the Real Life Channel?
17. How much do you think the real Andrea is like the version of her that the Scriptor created?
18. What do you think Andrea would do if she ever remembered everything about the Real Life Channel? Should Alan tell her anything about it?

Topics for Research and Further Discussion

1. Take notes as you watch one of your favorite TV shows. What things do you see that look like they could happen in real life? What things do you see that look like they could never happen in real life? Compare your lists with others in your class. Do people who are familiar with your show agree with you? Do people who aren't familiar with your show agree with you?
2. Even before Marcus Bligh started using the Scriptor on Alan, Sydney and Jason, he and Andrea were able to manipulate them into working with the Real Life Channel and doing what the Channel wanted. How did they do that? List and discuss some examples. Have you ever been manipulated into doing something in a similar way?
3. *The Real Life Channel* provides a behind-the-scenes look at the making of a TV show. In addition to the actors, you meet Owen the producer, Ruth the director, Robert the studio manager (also known as the floor director), Jennifer the makeup artist, Jana the wardrobe coordinator and Benito the stagehand. Research one of these jobs, or choose another TV studio job, and find out how it contributes to the overall production. Does it sound like a job you'd like to do?
4. Alan's fame grows under the Real Life Channel's influence, but that fame comes at a price. How does his life change as he becomes more famous? What does he lose? Do you think he would still lose those things even if he'd become famous without the Real Life Channel's influence? Make a list of some real celebrities. Do they have to give anything up because they're famous?
5. *The Real Life Channel* is a mixture of several different types of fiction. It has elements of comedy, mystery, fantasy and adventure. List some examples of each style. How do all the different styles combine to create the overall story?

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FIRST-PERSON ESSAY

Outside Looking In

An essay by *Real Life Channel* author Robert A. Black. Originally written for "GLBT Month" at Young Adult Books Central.

(http://www.yabookscentral.com/cfusion/index.cfm?fuseAction=authors.interview&author_id=3071&interview_id=154)

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"Hi, I'm Sydney, and these are my dads."

That was how the character Sydney Myerson-Walsh introduced herself to me, back when I was first putting ideas together for *The Real Life Channel*. It was a surprise. Much of my inspiration for the book came from my time working on the set of Nickelodeon's *You Can't Do That On Television* in the mid-1980s – but there was no one like Sydney back there. To this day, I'm not entirely sure how I thought of her. But as most authors will tell you, when a character is that insistent about something, it's best to listen – and so the Myerson-Walsh family became part of the story.

The next question I faced was deciding how to write them. I'm an outsider when it comes to GLBT fiction. I'm not gay, so I don't have any experiences of coming out or being discriminated against to draw on. Also, Sydney is only one of three main characters in *The Real Life Channel*, and her dads only have supporting roles. It isn't a story about being gay. It's a story that just happens to have some gay characters in it. The more I thought about it, the more I felt like that was exactly the approach I should take. I think stories with that kind of approach are important to tell these days.

When I was a kid, one of my favorite TV shows was the original *Star Trek*. Even now, I count its creator Gene Roddenberry among my biggest writing influences. People today may not realize that one of the most revolutionary things Roddenberry did on *Star Trek* was give it a multiracial cast. Non-white characters like Uhura and Sulu were among the first on television to be shown working side-by-side as equals with their white counterparts. But *Star Trek* was never *about* Sulu being Asian or Uhura being black. That was just who they were – and that was enough to make a difference. Actress Nichelle Nichols, who played Uhura, tells a story about the time she met Martin Luther King Jr., when Dr. King told her how important a

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character Uhura was and what a vital message her presence on *Star Trek* delivered. I've been fortunate enough to hear Ms. Nichols tell that story in person, and it has always stuck with me. I certainly had it on my mind when I decided to include Sydney and her two dads in my book.

Prejudice comes from many sources, but I think one of the biggest is ignorance. When we never see people who are different from ourselves, our fear of the unknown leads us to believe the worst about them. But if we can see these people as *people* – happy and sad, full of hopes and dreams or worries and concerns, and everything else that makes us all human – then we can start to realize that the differences between us aren't so scary after all.

With the GLBT community, I've learned this lesson in many places, including one you might not expect – at my church. We Episcopalians have been working on GLBT inclusion for quite a while, and so I've had the chance to participate side-by-side with gay and lesbian people in church activities. We sing together in my choir, I see them bringing their children to services or having them baptized, and we celebrate Sundays and holidays as single congregation. Sydney's parents, Tim and Jerry, are based on several gay and lesbian couples I know – and are named after one of them, too.

My book isn't going to change the world, but I figure that if kids read about Sydney and her dads, and some of them start to feel like the family down the street isn't so weird after all – or maybe that their *own* family isn't so weird after all – then I'll have done some good. Sometimes, it takes a person on the outside to give others a look inside. That's my theory, anyway.

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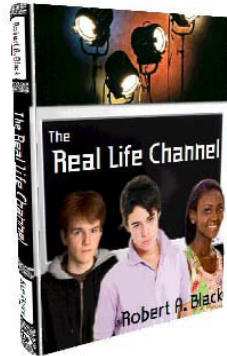
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