

A conversation with

MAL PEET

author of

EXPOSURE

Meet author Mal Peet. His previous Candlewick Press books include *Tamar*, the wartime story of secret identities that won the Carnegie Medal, as well as *Keeper* and *The Penalty*, his novels set in South America starring Paul Faustino.

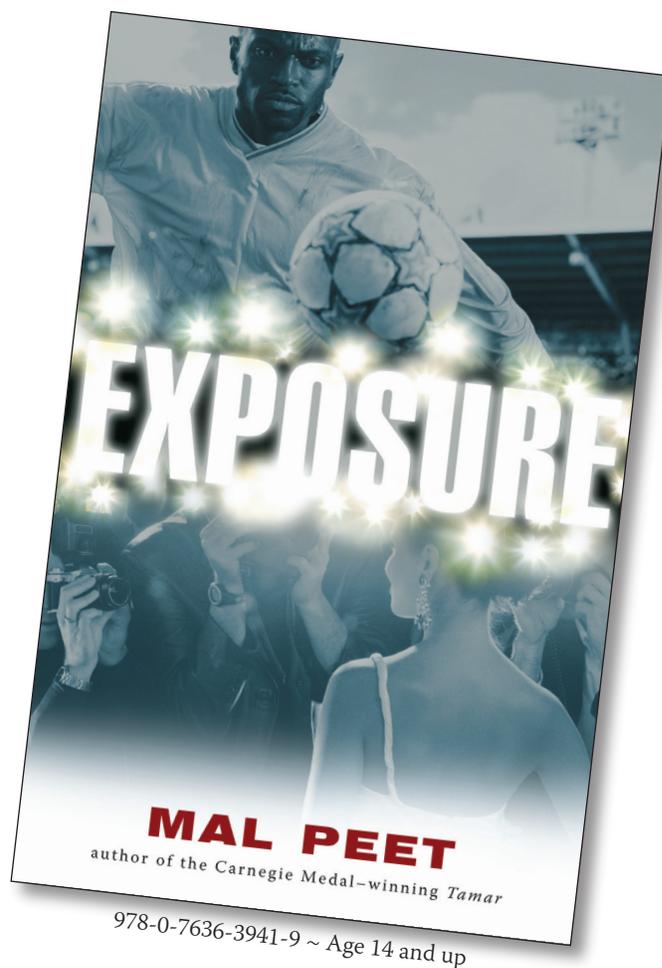
Here we ask Mal about what inspired him to write *Exposure*, a story of soccer stars, scandal, and ultimate destruction.

How much of your inspiration comes from real life and real people?

Oh, I always flinch when I see that word *inspiration*! It's rather too dramatic and glamorous a word to describe what happens with me, which is mainly a process of painstaking work. But I guess the short answer is not much. Some of the characters and events in *Tamar* were taken from real life, real history. But the other books are completely invented. It's true that David and Victoria Beckham got me thinking about the story that became *Exposure*, but the characters aren't based on them.

What research was involved in order to write the novel?

Hardly any. I read Shakespeare's *Othello* again, twice. That's about it.



Is the character Desmerelda based on a real-life pop star?

No. It's a sad confession, but I don't know any pop stars. I had trouble "getting" Desmerelda. Then one day I was reading a magazine and came across a picture of a gorgeous girl modeling clothes and I thought, *That's her!* Having decided what she looked like, I found it easier to invent her personality. Incidentally, the clothes that Desmerelda wears when she first appears in the novel are the clothes in that magazine photo. It's a kind of thank-you to the model, whose name I don't know.

Paul Faustino is complex. How easy was it to write this character?

Faustino was a late addition to the first novel, *Keeper*, and I got to like him, so I wrote about him some more.

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He's developed all by himself, really. I haven't sat and thought about him, imagined all the details of his life, and so on. Perhaps that's because he's like me in some ways — especially his bad habits.

Who are your favorite writers, and how have they inspired your work?

I always dread questions about “favorites.” I don't really have any. I read an awful lot, and there are several writers I admire. Some have taught me things about writing. They include Joseph Conrad, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Gabriel García Márquez. None of them is English, which is a bit weird, now I come to think of it. But I also learned a lot about storytelling from comics and films.

Do you think that the press coverage of soccer players and their personal lives is having a bad effect on the sport?

That's a tough one. I think it probably is, but I wouldn't be able to produce any hard evidence. Wayne Rooney might play better if the papers stopped taking the mick out of him and his wife. Or he might not. I think the obsession with “celebrities” is bad for us, though, which is one of the themes in *Exposure*. And I do think it's unfair that the press and TV mock soccer players for their lifestyles and alleged lack of taste and intelligence. Surely, all we can reasonably expect from a soccer player is that he or she be good at soccer. After all, no one knocks artists or nuclear physicists because they're lousy at golf or ballroom dancing.

Why did you decide to divide the novel into acts?

Well, because I took some of the plot and some of the characters' names from Shakespeare's play *Othello*, and I didn't want to hide that fact from anybody. So I used some of the devices you find in the play — the cast of characters at the beginning, the division into five acts — and I wrote some of the conversations in the form of stage dialogue. I wanted parts of the skeleton of the play to show through the flesh of the novel.

What is next for Paul Faustino?

I don't know, to be honest. He isn't in the novel I'm working on at the moment, but I suspect that one day I'll turn around from my desk and find him sitting on the sofa smoking his filthy cigarettes and wanting to know why I've been neglecting him.



Do you sketch out a rough plan for your novels, or do you put pen to paper at chapter one and leave the story to develop in its own way?

Usually, my “plan” for a novel is very rough indeed. That's because I'm completely useless at planning, and also because it's more interesting to let the story take twists and turns you didn't think of before you started writing it. But because I based *Exposure* on *Othello*, I had a sort of “map,” even though I took a very different direction toward the end of the book. And I hardly ever start at the beginning. I start with an incident I'm confident I can write and work backward and forward from there. It's probably not very efficient, but it's the only way I know.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

It's very risky, giving advice on writing, because every one does it differently. There are only two tips I'm certain of. One is to read a lot. Books are not made of ideas; they're made of words. They're made by choosing words, which means that the more words you know, the better your chances of making good choices. And the way you learn words is by reading. The second is not to be afraid.

