



AN INTERVIEW WITH 'THE EMPATHY KING' STEWART FOSTER

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[Joy Court](#) [1]

[246](#) [2]

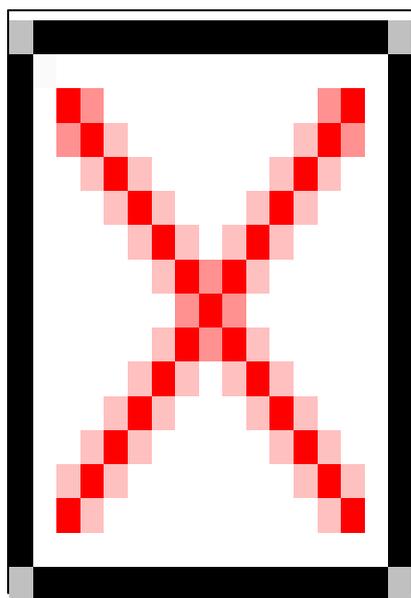
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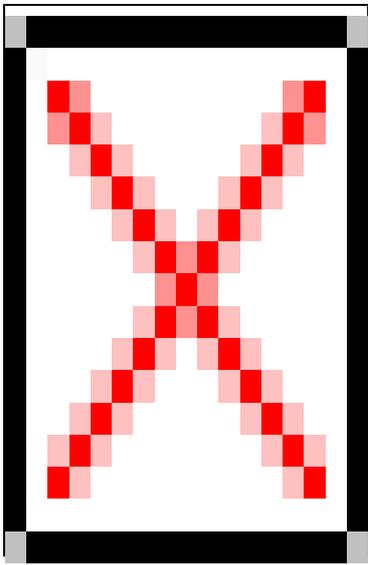
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Joy Court interviews author **Stewart Foster** about his new book, **The Perfect Parent Project**.

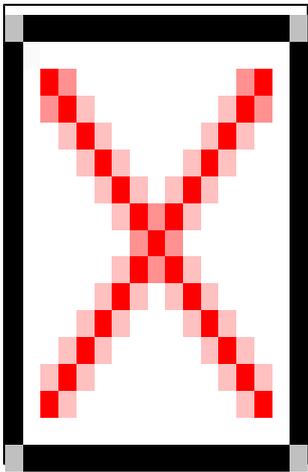
Joy Court interviews author **Stewart Foster** about his new book, [The Perfect Parent Project](#) [3].



Once introduced by a fellow author as 'The Empathy King' **Stewart Foster** has indeed become renowned for character driven stories which provide real insights into other lives. Although these lives are often beset by quite serious issues, it is the people and not the problems that drive his writing. The issues do really matter to him, but he doesn't want to preach, 'I want the messages to be there, but the story has to come first'. His latest middle grade novel, [The Perfect Parent Project](#) [3], is no exception. This is the story of 11-year-old Sam McCann, who longs for a permanent home and a real family. Tired of being turned down for adoption, and with multiple foster home failures behind him, he decides to take matters into his own hands and with the help of his best friend Leah, find his own perfect parents himself. This quest takes Sam on an emotional, often unintentionally hilarious, journey, where he finds out that the things that he thinks matter the most (**Disneyland**, **PS4s** and **BMW M5s**) may not actually be the things he really needs.

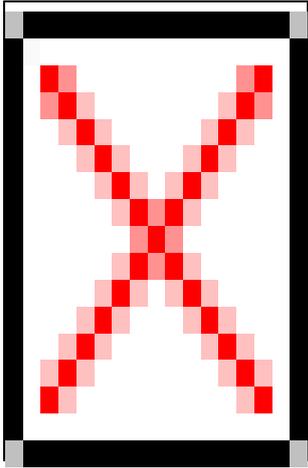


Having himself been a foster parent and seen first-hand the difficulties children faced, it comes as no surprise that the idea of writing about a boy in care has been simmering with Stewart for some time and although Sam's story is fictional 'the emotions that run through it are very real'. Sam's deep mistrust of the system, the vulnerability that hides behind a cocky exterior and some of the painful incidents from past placements that Sam relates are absolutely genuine. As is the hilarious moniker Sam gives his social worker 'Rock Star Steve'. This is the nickname Stewart coined for their own Rod Stewart look-a-like social worker! Sam is a character that he 'loved unequivocally from the start', says Stewart, to the extent that he avoided describing issues that would inevitably show him in a bad light. Sam's foster family only has one child - the totally endearing Reilly - precisely because had there been siblings then, to be true to life, the insecure foster child would have blatantly played one against the other to his own advantage. But Stewart still reflects that reality in anecdotes from past placements, so it is not a saccharine portrayal of Sam at all, and the relationship with Reilly turns out to be crucial to developing Sam's understanding of what makes a real family.



Talking to Stewart over a very dodgy Zoom connection to the boat where he does all his writing, it became very apparent that all his characters are as real to him as he hopes they become to his readers. He is not a writer who makes detailed plans. He discovers the story and the characters as he writes and admits to making himself cry at times. Although he may not realise it until later the stories often contain elements of himself and certainly elements of his own experience. For example, his father was a policeman and they lived in a police house set in the middle of a huge council estate in Bristol and he credits this for enabling him to write authentically working class characters and settings - something he feels is often lacking from the overly middle class world of children's fiction. In **Check Mates** it became apparent that Felix's school difficulties were caused, not by the dyslexia of the first attempt, but by the ADHD that Stewart could recognise in himself to some degree. He could tell the story of Alex's OCD in **All the Things That Could Go Wrong** even more authentically because the character reflected the experiences and his own observations of a very close friend. Of course, he does research, particularly checking details of medical conditions such as that suffered by Joe in his [Branford Boase Award](#) [4] shortlisted first children's novel, **The Bubble Boy**. He was able to ensure his

portrayal of the care system in the new book was up to date by talking to a current foster carer with over 30 years' experience; after trying and failing to get a social worker to go 'on the record'.



This concern with detail is so children can identify with the lives he creates. 'I care about the kids, so I have to get it right'. For this passionate, and currently very frustrated, advocate of author visits to schools, that moment 'when kids say- that's me- that's the best thing', or when they are able to talk to him about being bullied etc. In fact, he would love the chance to see what a longer residency in a school, rather than just a single visit, could achieve in terms of the emotional wellbeing of pupils.

It was actually an author visit that sparked his own writing career when [H. E. Todd](#) [5] of **Bobby Brewster** fame visited his school and Stewart told him the idea he had for a story. He is so grateful that the 70 year old Todd took the time to listen and told him to go home and write down 'exactly what you told me' and then just 'blow it up like a balloon' which is what he did 'filling three exercise books and winning a school's writing competition with the result. Eventually it would be a potential entry to a Waterstone's novel competition that spurred the creation of his first (adult) novel during a wet Wimbledon fortnight holiday. Although it did not start out as a children's book it was with his second book, **The Bubble Boy**, that he found that his real metier would be writing for that audience, but he had to learn to moderate his language and occasionally his humour while striving to fulfil his ambition to make his books as hard hitting and realistic as possible. This reader, for one, believes that he achieves that in spades whilst also managing to be warm, light-hearted and entertaining too!

Joy Court is Reviews Editor for **The School Librarian** and Past Chair of **the CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals**.

[The Perfect Parent Project](#) [3] is published by Simon and Schuster, 978-1471191268, £7.99 pbk.

Page Number:

33

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[2] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/246>

[3] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/246/childrens-books/reviews/the-perfect-parent-project>

[4] <https://branfordboaseaward.org.uk/previous-winners/>

[5] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/h-e-todd/profile>