

JAMES KLISE

on writing

THE ART OF SECRETS

When I lead fiction workshops for young writers, we sometimes begin by talking about secrets.

No matter one's age, everyone knows the delirious thrill and the awful discomfort of a secret. Even that famous phrase—"but it's a secret"—can draw people in, wanting more, wanting every scandalous detail.

It's always good to introduce secrets to a story, because a secret automatically brings with it tension and suspense, two things that are essential to keeping a reader turning pages. During workshops, I'll ask each participant to come up with a juicy secret for a character, and then we brainstorm the narrative possibilities. For example, how does the secret control the character? To what lengths will the character go to keep the secret? Finally, what might happen to the character if—*heaven forbid, yes, soon, please!*—the secret is revealed?

In my first book, *Love Drugged*, I wrote about one teenager's secret: he's gay. That's a realistic, fairly common secret, the kind that may control a person's life, as it controlled mine when I was young and closeted and stupid. My new novel, *The Art of Secrets*, shows that through a character's simple act of withholding all the facts, one powerful secret can control an entire community of people.



JAMES KLISE

is the author of *Love Drugged*, which won a Stonewall honor and received glowing reviews. He lives in Chicago, where he is also a high school librarian. His short stories have appeared in many journals, including *StoryQuarterly*, *New Orleans Review*, *Ascent*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. *The Art of Secrets* is his second novel.

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It's often the case that one person's secret is another one's mystery. *The Art of Secrets* begins with the suspicious circumstances of an apartment fire in Chicago. The fire leaves the family of fifteen-year-old Saba Khan temporarily homeless. In Saba's first journal entry, she reflects that losing her family's home may have been "the best thing that ever happened" to her. She knows why, of course, but the reader doesn't . . . yet.

Moving forward, we meet a diverse cast of people who are all affected by this fire. More secrets are hinted at and revealed and confidences are shared between characters as they all try to articulate exactly how they feel about what's happened and their view of what should be done. Everybody's got a different take—so to speak—and it's amusing, and sometimes shocking, to observe the subtle and overt ways characters respond to this tragic situation by asking, "What's in it for me?"

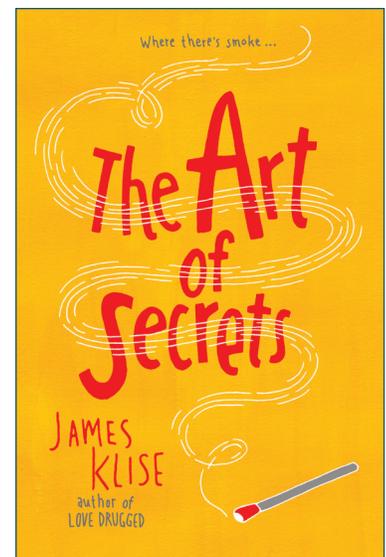
When I began working on *The Art of Secrets*, I knew that Chicago's own Henry Darger (1892-1973) would provide a fascinating example of a truly secret life. Darger was an enigmatic writer and self-taught painter, the quintessential "outsider artist." Despite living in the city, he was exceptionally isolated. Every morning, he left his home in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood, walked to Mass and then to his job as a hospital janitor. At night, in his quiet, disordered bachelor's apartment on Webster Avenue, he wrote and made art. This went on for many decades. At the end of Darger's life, his landlord discovered his immense creative output, including a fifteen-thousand-page typed novel manuscript that he had illustrated in lavish, intricately detailed watercolor scenes on wide stretches of paper. If you aren't familiar with Darger's work, Google his name to see examples, and you'll notice at once the beauty, terror, and mystery of his vision. You can also find his work in museums around the world.

Like many outsider artists, Darger never showed his work publicly during his lifetime. He wasn't part of a writing group or a painter's salon. He never could have imagined the exposure and acclaim his work would find after his death. So then we may ask, What compelled this man to turn away from the world and to labor so faithfully and fixedly, over so many years, in order to give such elaborate form to his visions? What was in it for him?

Well, what inspires any of us to do difficult things? What spurs us to roll up our sleeves and help others? What gives us the courage to risk our hearts and enter relationships, or travel far from home to see the world, or speak up when we witness wrongdoing? What motivates us—ahem, some of us—to commit crimes?

Ah, the question of motive. Always at the heart of a good mystery, isn't it? When Darger's work makes an appearance in *The Art of Secrets*, questions about motive take center stage. Naturally I would love to tell you more, including all the outrageous, juicy details—but now that the book is finished, it's no longer my secret to tell.

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