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Middle school saga : Author's debut novel inspired by SB childhood

By ELIZABETH HAMILTON, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
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Middle school means the years of zits and braces, the simultaneous existence of baby fat and facial hair, embarrassing P.E. classes and bullies throwing kids in trash cans. Most people try to forget those years.

But not Teddy Steinkellner, who embraced his awkward years of ungainly youth as inspiration for his first novel.

Mr. Steinkellner was a 19-year-old college sophomore at Stanford when he decided to tackle the colossal task of writing a book. He asked his parents if he could write at home for the summer instead of get a job and when they said yes, he snatched the opportunity.

"I always had a vague idea to write stuff," Mr. Steinkellner said during a recent interview by phone from the Stanford campus in Palo Alto where he was helping his girlfriend move in. "I thought, 'What's the big thing I can try to do that maybe I'll fail at and maybe I'll try to succeed?'"

His goal: finish the novel before his 20th birthday. At 11:59 p.m. Oct. 11, 2009, just a minute short of 20, Mr. Steinkellner finished the first draft of "Trash Can Days: A Middle School Saga." Almost four years later, Mr. Steinkellner, now 23 and a college grad, has successfully published the book.

Mr. Steinkellner wanted to write about something familiar, so he chose two topics he knew well: his hometown of Santa Barbara and his experiences in middle school. "Trash Can Days" tells the comical story of four kids and their experiences in those years.

"Middle school is a time when everybody's pituitary glands are going off at different rates," said Mr. Steinkellner. "Eunuch boys with high voices and hairy-backed boys exist in the same world. There are people ... with the emotional maturity of fully grown adults and toddlers all in the same place."

The book is set in a fictional town called San Paulo, but Mr. Steinkellner said any local who reads it will recognize San Paulo as a thinly veiled Santa Barbara.

"It's a read-between-the-lines Santa Barbara," he said.

He even kept the name of Chapala Market on Milpas Street, where he and his friends often visited after school.

At 2 p.m. today, Mr. Steinkellner will sign copies of "Trash Can Days" (Disney-Hyperion, \$16.99) at Chaucer's Books, 3321 State St.

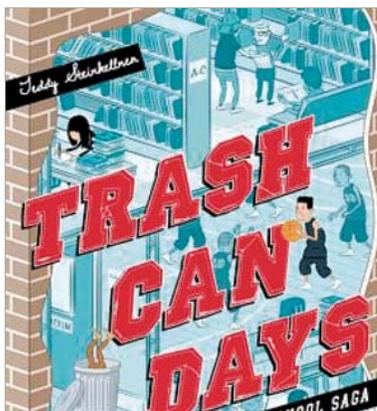
"It feels like a huge achievement," he said of the appearance. "I've been going there my whole life and it's synonymous with Santa Barbara."

Mr. Steinkellner's middle school years were spent at Santa Barbara Junior High School, where he was struck by the variety of lifestyles



In middle school, bullies dumped Teddy Steinkellner in a trash can. That event and others inspired his debut novel, "Trash Can Days: A Middle School Saga."

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junior high school, where he was struck by the variety of lifestyles and family backgrounds among the students.

"You had kids from Montecito whose parents owned film companies and produced movies and you had kids whose parents worked for those parents and maybe did things like gardening or housekeeping."

Two of the main characters in "Trash Can Days" are friends who grew up on the same mansion property. Jake's parents own the mansion where Danny's parents work as a gardener and a maid.

Mr. Steinkellner, son of Emmy-winning writers-producers Cheri and Bill Steinkellner, said he based the book on people he knew growing up.

"It's pieces of people I know in Santa Barbara. The main boy, Jake, is very much like me — more pubescent, but essentially the same. The urges and nerves and pains he feels in junior high are the same things I felt."

While the book's audience is mostly children and young adults, Mr. Steinkellner said he wrote it for people of all ages.

"I'd like to speak to anyone in junior high or nervous about junior high or has been to junior high and doesn't want to go back," he said.

During his middle school years, Mr. Steinkellner said he was introverted, timid and a bit awkward. He said his mother calls those years his "junior hibernation."

Just like the fictional character Jake, Mr. Steinkellner was dumped in a trash can.

"It was in P.E. and I was one of the smallest, shrimpiest, pre-pubescent boys in class. We were lining up to get changed in the locker room and the teacher was making copies or doing something and a bunch of the more aggressive boys just saw me standing there and they just wanted to, like, amuse themselves and so they dumped me in the trash can. I was simultaneously terrified and perplexed that such a cliché thing was happening to me."

The teacher caught them, but Mr. Steinkellner told her they were just horsing around.

"I felt that if I had ratted them out that it was just going to be worse for me later on."

Fortunately, he was right and from then on the boys left him alone.

Mr. Steinkellner attributes the success of publishing a first novel to his parents and their creative home environment. Cheri and Bill Steinkellner are writers and producers of the popular TV sitcom "Cheers" among other projects.

"I did grow up in a creatively rich household and it definitely inspired me," he said. "The work ethic and the humor and just the daily devotion to writing that I got from them is worth infinity dollars to me."

Mr. and Mrs. Steinkellner told the News-Press they were not surprised when their son decided to write a novel.

"In high school, he wrote quite a bit," Bill said. "He'd always been a great reader, and if you read a lot, you'll be some kind of writer — or a hermit."

Bill said Teddy would write jokes in the margins of his school papers. He said Teddy's success is a product of his organization and lightheartedness.

Making good use of his parents' expertise, Teddy sent rough drafts of "Trash Can Days" to them and said they provided the best feedback.

"It was one of the most amazing things in the world to read something before someone else gets to read it and before it gets published," Bill said. "I know where the inside jokes come from."

Teddy has written a sequel to "Trash Can Days" and it's now undergoing final edits. He is also working on a third novel unrelated to the series.

"I'm looking to keep doing this as long as I can," he said, calling his early success "flabbergasting and unexpected."

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IF YOU GO

Teddy Steinkellner will sign copies of his book, "Trash Can Days: A Middle School Saga" (Disney-Hyperion, \$16.99), 2 p.m. today at Chaucer's Books, 3321 State St. For more information, call 682-6787.



Teddy Steinkellner with his mom, Cheri Steinkellner, and dad, Bill Steinkellner, at his graduation from Santa Barbara Junior High School in 2003.

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