

SPYLARK

BY DANNY RURLANDER

SYNOPSIS

The book opens with Tom (13) flying his home-made drone, Skylark, around the Lake District hills where he lives. Through the drone's camera, he witnesses the deliberate sinking of an empty lake cruiser. Flying his drone again the next day, Tom sees a military helicopter which chases him, forcing him to crash land.


Meanwhile, at school, his fear of closed spaces is highlighted through an encounter with a bully, Snakey, whose victimisation of Tom has added to his isolation since the trauma of losing his father and coming to live with his aunt. Back at home, Aunt Emily insists Tom befriend some visitors his own age, Maggie and her brother Joel, who have arrived for the holidays.

Tom, who we learn uses drones to help cope with his difficulty in walking after an injury and the tragedy of losing his parents, behaves badly to the guests. While retrieving Skylark he is ambushed by the RAF helicopter pilot, who refuses to believe Tom could have built such an advanced drone.

Back in the air, Tom observes Maggie and Joel exploring the island on which they will later camp. He also sees more suspicious activity on the neighbouring island and in a disused quarry, which he photographs as evidence. While he gathers further clues, Tom continues to reject friendship with Maggie and Joel.

Tom seeks out his trusted friend and mentor, the school handyman, Jim Rothwell, who helps him realise that he has uncovered a criminal

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cell. The criminals are preparing to assassinate an important person during a lake cruise later in the week, using three mountain peaks as launch sites for an unknown weapon.

When Maggie and Joel make enemies of Snakey and his friends, Tom rescues them and takes them into his confidence. Through Maggie's close shave with the terrorists, including their mastermind, Rufus Clay, they gather enough evidence to incriminate them, and learn that the target of the attack is the Queen.

But when this evidence is lost, the three friends realise it is down to them alone to prevent the attack. They work on a risky plan which involves incapacitating the criminals using Tom's drones as high-tech weapons. However Rufus Clay's weapons are more advanced, and their plan fails. At the last moment Tom realises the attack is being carried out with weaponised drones disguised as birds, undetectable to the security forces guarding the Queen. Tom risks everything in a desperate attempt to save the Queen's life.

Tom's intervention is successful, and yet, instead of being made a hero, he himself is arrested as the suspected source of the threat and, through a cruel error on the part of the police, Snakey receives the credit instead. It is now down to Maggie and Joel to find the real culprits and prove Tom's innocence.

Meanwhile Tom is kidnapped by the criminals and imprisoned in a basement in their remote farm where his phobia of enclosed spaces adds to the ordeal. During his interrogation with a furious Rufus Clay, Tom learns that Clay's motives are financial - he sells cutting edge weapons and the purpose of the foiled attack on the Queen was to demonstrate his products and attract buyers. Tom learns that the next attack will be on the RAF's Red Arrows display team later in the week. The others discover that Tom has been kidnapped and go in pursuit. Meanwhile they are being pursued by Snakey who still has a grudge against them. In a terrifying night time confrontation Snakey unwittingly leads them to where Tom is being held and they prepare to divert the criminals in order to help Tom escape.

Meanwhile Tom uses a micro-drone hidden in his walking stick to escape from his cell. The only way out of the terrorist's base is via an underground aqueduct which empties into the river near his home. After an internal struggle in which he confronts his deepest fears, Tom escapes with seconds to spare.

Now Maggie and Joel become the target of the criminals, including the ruthless Mike McCain who pursues them in



a gripping car chase and shoot-out which ends in a collision.

Tom hurries straight back to the farm for a final confrontation with Rufus Clay via Skylark. He then finds his friends, and disables McCain with an anaesthetic-filled dart fired from Skylark, just as McCain is about to shoot Maggie, saving her life. The friends are re-united, Tom's innocence is vindicated, lost evidence is dramatically re-discovered, and Tom Hopkins emerges wiser and kinder, ready to face life in person, rather than from the safety of a video image.

WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

'Set in his native Lake District, Danny Rurlander's thrilling debut novel follows a group of brave kids and a bunch of home-made drones. Together, they're the only ones who can foil an assassination plot! This is a perfect adventure of the absolutely classic kind - think Swallows and Amazons brought bang up to date. I love it!'

BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Danny studied English Literature at the University of East Anglia, where he also learned to fly with the RAF. He has lived in Austria, Kenya, Devon and Australia but always longed to return to the Lake District where he grew up messing about in boats and camping on islands, and where his first novel, *Spylark*, is set. He now lives in Lancaster with his family and works on the staff team of a city centre church. He loves exploring wide open spaces with an Ordnance Survey map, writes late at night, and firmly believes in the power of a good story.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'A number of influences and experiences have found their way into *Spylark*: my own childhood adventures in the part of the world where the book is set; a first-hand knowledge of flying aeroplanes gained through my time with the RAF; and perhaps most of all memories of books I read as a child in which courageous children face their fears in the wilderness and come out wiser people for the adventure.



These influences came together on a particular day – probably around four years before the book was finally accepted for publication – when my son and I were camping by Lake Windermere in the English Lake District. We were watching the setting sun lighting up the bracken in an orange glow on the horseshoe of fells at the head of the lake, a deep blue sky studded with a few early stars behind, and bats flitting through the trees. I not only knew at that moment that here was my setting for a classic adventure story with a modern twist, but I could also see in my mind’s eye a scene involving a triangle of hills that would become a crucial plot point in the book. That key scene became the foundation around which the whole book was built.

But what excited me most about writing *Spylark* was the concept of a story featuring drones which, as far as I am aware, had never been done before in this particular way. Fantasy, an omniscient narrator, and even science fiction can all easily enable someone to be in two places at once, swap the action between locations in the blink of an eye, and make it possible for one character to view another character’s actions without them knowing they are watching. The beauty of drones, however, is that you can do all that in the real world, from a single character’s point of view. Not only did this give me as a writer a unique and original narrative tool to play with, but for the main character Tom Hopkins, this opened up his life to an entirely new world.’ **DANNY RURLANDER**

THEMES

- Friendship and loyalty
- Kindness and empathy
- The nature of evil
- Adventure and mystery
- Bullying and its effects
- Loss and grief
- Technology and its potential
- Flight and escapism



WRITING STYLE

Spylark is written in a traditional narrative style, in third person, past tense, sticking closely to its main characters' perspectives. Chapters are written from two points of view, Tom's and Maggie's, enabling the action to unfold naturally as the perspectives entwine. The writing is at times beautifully descriptive, particularly with regard to landscape and setting, but never to the detriment of pace. *Spylark* is an action-packed and adventurous modern tale, full of punchy dialogue. **41 chapters, 289 pages, ages 9+**

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. A Bird's Eye Perspective

Tom's drone, Skylark, enables him to escape his troubles and fly away, experiencing the familiar surroundings of his home in the Lake District from a bird's eye point of view.

Go through the novel and mark the pages in which Tom is viewing the world through his drone. How does the writing change in relation to the surrounding passages?

Pick a place with which you are familiar – it might be your home, your school, or anywhere you like. Using print-out photos, your own drawings and maps, create a collage building up a picture of this area. Now, imagine you have a drone like Skylark. Envisage flying the drone over your familiar territory – how does your perspective change? As you work on a creative piece of writing, informed by your collage, remember how the author of *Spylark* brought his characters' surroundings to life and echo his use of vivid descriptive language.

Create a class display combining the images and written pieces – can you tell which written piece matches which image?

2. Gadgets

In *Spylark*, as in lots of spy thrillers, technology plays an important role in the story. Tom is an expert at designing



and creating drones, and his skill proved instrumental in foiling the terrorists. As a class, discuss what role technology plays in the book – what different gadgets or technological instruments are involved and what do they do? How are they disguised?

Separate into small groups. Each group is a separate team in a counter-terrorist organisation such as MI5. Your task is to design a spy gadget. The teacher should assign each group one of these roles:

- Escaping from a locked room
- Distracting the enemy
- Spying on the enemy
- Protecting your allies
- Seeking the enemy

As a team, create a blue-print style drawing for the gadget along with a list of descriptive instructions on how to use the gadget in your given role. Present your gadget to the class – whose do you think is the most successful?

3. Genre and influences

'A number of influences and experiences have found their way into Spylark ... perhaps most of all memories of books I read as a child.' – Danny Rurlander, Author Motivation

A huge part of why the author wrote this novel is that he was inspired by other novels, particularly the classic adventure novels of his childhood. He drew on the characteristics of these novels and put a new spin on them to produce a modern-day adventure with a classic feel. A huge part of being an author is to know your genre, recognise its rules and either work within or subvert them to create something original and fresh.

As a class, discuss what 'genre' means and what 'tropes' are. As part of this discussion, try to think of as many different genres of story as you can. For instance: adventure, fantasy, science fiction, horror, spy stories, detective stories, dramas ... and so on. The teacher should write the genres on the board at the front of the class.



Separate into small groups. The teacher should secretly assign a genre to each group in the class – perhaps by writing the possible genres on slips of paper and having a member from each group draw them from a hat. The groups should research and discuss the following:

- Prominent work in their given genre
- The ‘tropes’ of their given genre
- What they like about the genre
- What they don’t like and why

At the end of the session, each group should put together a short scene which they feel represents the genre they’ve been assigned. The group should perform the scene in front of the rest of the class. Can the spectators correctly guess the genre from the scene?

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *‘I don’t need new friends ...’* (Page 17)

What is the role of friendship in *Spylark*? How has Tom’s life changed from the beginning of the novel to the end? How big a role did Maggie and Joel play in these changes? Do you think Tom would have achieved as much without them?

2. *There was a time when Tom would happily have played the tour guide that Aunt Emily wanted ... But now, all he wanted was to get back to his workshop ...* (Page 17-18)

How has Tom’s life been changed by his accident – both physically and otherwise? What is your sense of Tom’s character before the accident in contrast with his character at the beginning of the book? What are the ways Tom copes with his physical difficulty?

3. *The air was crisp and clear, the lake and hills saturated with colour. A solitary yacht, its sails white in the sun, meandered downwind.* (Page 48)



What do you think about how the landscape of the novel is described? How important is the landscape in the plot and what does it represent to Tom? How effectively does the author conjure the sensations of flying over the Lake District and how is this achieved?

4. *'What excited me most about writing Spylark was the concept of a story featuring drones ...'* Author Motivation

What do you think about the use of drones in the novel? How central are they to the story and how are they used? Do you agree with the author that they are an unusual device in fiction? Why do you think this is – what are the challenges in using drones in storytelling and what are the benefits?

5. *'Careful, Snakey. We don't want to actually hurt him, do we?'* (Page 12)

What is the role of bullying in the novel? Why do the bullies pick on Tom, do you think? How do Tom and the others ultimately overcome Snakey and his friends? How do the bullies compare and relate to the main villain, Rufus Clay?

6. *'As long as human beings want to kill each other – which will be for as long as they roam this good earth – I will have my customers!'* (Page 207)

Do you agree with Rufus that human beings will always want to kill each other? Why do you think Rufus has such a negative outlook on humanity and how has this informed his villainy? How is Rufus characterised and do you find him an effective, frightening villain?

