

# A Conversation with the Author

**Q:** Candlewick has dubbed *Flora & Ulysses* “genre-bending” because it features a split narrative format incorporating graphic and comics-style layouts and illustrations. Did you write the book this way purposely? Is this a genre you intentionally wanted to experiment with?

**A:** I love it when you guys dub things. I’ve been going around for the last few weeks saying to myself, “I have written a genre-bending novel.” It makes me feel zippy. Alas, I cannot take any credit for the genre-bendiness. I wrote the novel as straight text. The editorial and design geniuses at Candlewick came up with the idea of doing part of the text as comics. I thought the idea was brilliant, and I said, “Holy bagumba! I will give it a try!”

**Q:** Our entry point into the story of Ulysses is literally and figuratively through a vacuum cleaner. Explain how your own connection to the vacuum cleaner of all vacuum cleaners first inspired this story.

**A:** My mother had an Electrolux tank vacuum cleaner that she was, um, obsessed with. Actually, she loved the vacuum cleaner. And in a weird way, the Ulysses 2000X, and what happens because of it, is an homage to my mother. My mother loved to laugh.

**Q:** Were you a comics reader as a child, like Flora? Do you remember having any favorite superheroes?

**A:** What I read as a child, what I *lived* in as a child, was Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts*. My brother and I checked out *Peanuts* anthologies from the Cooper Memorial Library and read them from front to back and then started over again. My favorite superhero is Charlie Brown.

**Q:** Did you have any kind of strong reactions when you first saw K. G. Campbell’s art for the book? Is it anything like what you envisioned while you were writing?

**A:** I did have a strong reaction. I levitated with joy. It’s nothing like I envisioned. It’s better than anything I am capable of envisioning.

**Q:** Another common strand in many of your books is the emergence of an unlikely hero. Ulysses is about as unlikely as they get. What drew you to a squirrel for this story?

**A:** Well, there was a squirrel death on the front steps of my house. And I thought, What if the squirrel didn’t die? What if the squirrel were rescued? It is that “marvelous what-if” that continues to preoccupy me.

**Q:** Your books have certainly navigated humor writing on many levels, particularly the series for younger readers. Was it a challenge to sustain a humorous, laugh-out-loud sort of narrative of this length?

**A:** All I know is that this book never failed to make me laugh. I did a lot of rewrites, and I laughed my way through all of them. This could be because I am crazy. Or maybe it is because the book is funny. You decide.

**Q:** Many of your characters have very healthy appetites, even food fixations. What is it about food-driven characters that you love to write about?

**A:** Well, obviously, if I write about food-driven characters, then I get to write about food. Which means I get to think about food. Which I love to do. Almost as much as I like to eat food.

**Q:** *Flora & Ulysses* has a big, bursting heart, and central to that is Flora’s relationship with her parents. She winds up in a very different place with them by the end of the story. Can you talk a little about that journey?

**A:** Well, that takes us back to the “marvelous what-if” again. What if things can be put back together? What if there is a way for us to reach out to each other? What if there is a way for us to take hold of the people we love? What if we were brave enough to do that? What would happen then?

