

# The Pebble of Battipaglia

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing  
Department of English Literature and Linguistics  
Bar-Ilan University

Richard Schneider

017-114-257

Advisor: Dr. Yael Shapira

[dd15/mm05/yyyy2018](#)

## תלוק הבטיפגליה

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לבלשנות וספרות אנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

ריצ'רד שניידר

017-114-257

מנחה: ד"ר יעל שפירא

[15/05/2018](#)

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## 1. Aims and General Description

*The Pebble of Battipaglia* will be a young adult quasi-bildungsroman set in the modern day DC suburbs. It will recount the 9th grade year of ~~our~~the protagonist, Gavin Koval.

Major themes of this novel is being yourself, Gavin will experiment with trying to be cool, to fit in, to work, as a teacher, and a person who went through school, have seen far too many students trying to be cool, trying to be something they're not, had their whole lives are eroded and their identities lost, in a world of social media and digital technology, where everyone is trying to be someone else. In my story, I want this "trying" to come across as foolish.

Further, in an age of many competing forms of entertainment, like TV shows, movies, the internet, sports, -and electronic games, I want young readers to find a book that is Aside from themes and words like "bildungsroman", my main aim for this novel is for it to be fun to read, enabling them to become curators of their entertainment. Nowadays, there isn't a dearth of entertainment forms. People, especially kids, can turn to any number of ways to entertain themselves: TV shows, movies, the internet, sports, electronic games, and more. What's the value added from a book? A book opens up a world in your mind and turns you into the curator. Books teach you while they learn vocabulary words and improve their/your ability to process language. There are other benefits to books, too many to be mentioned here. However, if a book isn't enjoyable, then most people, especially kids, won't want to read it. If this happens, none of those benefits are realized.

[u2] הערות עם: Move out

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[u3] הערות עם: No contractions

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מעוצב: גופן: לא נטוי, גופן עבר עברית ושפות אחרות: נטוי

[u5] הערות עם: Out

[u6] הערות טב: New page for each new section

מעוצב:מרווח בין שורות: כפול

מעוצב:מרווח בין שורות: כפול

מעוצב:סמן

מעוצב:כניסה: שורה ראשונה: 0 ס"מ

[u7] הערות טב: Move to Conceptual Background

מעוצב:סמן

מעוצב:כניסה: שורה ראשונה: 0 ס"מ, מרווח בין שורות: כפול

[u8] הערות טב: Delete

[u9] הערות טב: Footnote the source.

[u10] הערות טב: How about a little research here? I'm sure you can find a few good quotes about the effects of reading on young minds.

מעוצב:לא סמן

## 2. Conceptual Background

My writing has been influenced by many literary and non-literary works. Each of these influences will affect *The Pebble of Battipaglia*.

As with the vast majority of 9th graders, Gavin is going through that awkward transitional phase between old child and young adult (which is not to say that his 9th grade self is aware that this is happening). Compounding matters is that he is already pretty awkward. Cut from the classic nerd mold, he is confident when discussing girl characters in a sci-fi movie but not confident when talking to real, actual girls. Confident when busting his friends' "chops". Not confident when meeting potential friends. Unfortunately for Gavin, the big, scary world of high school doesn't care. He will either need to conquer his awkwardness or let it consume him.

This novel must be enjoyable for young adults to read. It must give this audience a reason to engage in private reading. My first memory of private reading comes from when I was in 2nd grade. I remember getting to school early and heading immediately to the library to grab books by William Sleator and read them. I don't know what possesses a 2nd grader to voluntarily read. I have an identical twin, and *he* didn't come join me. So it could not have been that there was some command from our parents to read. I have no idea what made me want to read instead of playing games with my classmates. But read I did.

One of the reasons I want to write a young adult novel is because I want to encourage young students to read. Dr. Laura Justice writes, "Once children begin to read, even at the most basic level, their reading of text becomes the greatest source of novel words and concepts, complex syntax and narrative structures, which then further propel their language development forward."<sup>1</sup>

This kind of propulsion is what I wish to effect. I am a firm believer that reading at a young age is a boon to young minds.

<sup>1</sup> Justice, Laura M. "Literacy and its Impact on Child Development: Comments on Tomblin and Sénéchal."

William Sleator was the first author that did that for me. He wrote science fiction books for young adults and children. *House of Stairs* is about a group of kids trapped in a never ending staircase and the psychological and social dynamics that play out. *Singularity* is about a “runt” twin who discovers a shack in the woods where time moves much faster. He takes the opportunity to train his body/mind so that he won’t get intimidated by his brother anymore. *Interstellar Pig* is about a boy who unwittingly enters an intergalactic board game and ends up representing the human race. *The Green Futures of Tycho* was my first introduction to time travel. In it, a boy finds a bizarrely shaped handheld device which allows him to travel through time.

The writer who has inspired me the most is Philip K. Dick. A primarily sci-fi author, Dick wrote short stories and novels which tackle many themes and ideas. Often times, empathy is a major theme or focus. But beyond the themes, Dick had an ability to take a world or reality wholly different from our own and almost seamlessly transport you there. Within no time, you were in the world, no matter how strange or foreign it should seem. One of his more famous works, *The Man in the High Castle*, is not even classical sci-fi. It is an alternate history (which is technically considered sci-fi even if all the “rules of reality” are obeyed). It explores the lives of a few people living in a world where Germany and Japan won World War Two. Within no time, you are in the world. Dick does this by two means. Mean one First is his attention to the little details. For example, one of the protagonists smokes “Land-O-Smiles” brand marijuana cigarettes. A lot of authors would stop at the fact that marijuana is legal. Others would stop at assuming that Camel or Marlboro is the brand. But Dick goes one step further and is simultaneously able to poke fun at marketing/consumerism and add an extra little bit of authenticity that shows that this world is “real.” Mean two Second is through exposition, the whose aim of which is to be as short and integrated into the story as possible. In *Man in the High Castle*, Dick integrates the explanation to the reader of what has happened in this alternate history into kind of an existential pondering of one of the characters during a moment of crisis. It

does not feel added-in or unnatural. Contrary to how he accomplished it here, Dick tended to avoid exposition if at all possible. He trusted that if his details were good enough, then the reader would be comfortable. In the fictional universe of *The Pebble of Battipaglia*, there will be elements which are foreign enough to warrant some kind of exposition. I will attempt to keep the exposition as minimal as possible.

I will be writing this novel with a benchmark in mind. I do not have high hopes to reach it, but there will be a novel pushing me to write as well as I can. It is my favorite novel, *A Scanner Darkly*, by Philip K. Dick. Very minimal on the sci-fi elements, this story takes place in the near future (1994, though it was published in 1977). It follows the life of an undercover narcotics agent who becomes more and more addicted to the mind-altering substance which he has been sent to track. This novel is a masterpiece in many ways. Firstly, the writing is superb. The words used and the way they flow together are beautiful. Secondly, Dick's sarcastic/dark sense of humor shine. Thirdly, the way the plot twists and turns and the way the characters develop is simply brilliant. *A Scanner Darkly* inspires me. It shows me that writing can be simultaneously beautiful, entertaining, funny, moving, and thought-provoking.

מעוצב:מרווח בין שורות: כפול

I can not only remember the plots of these stories as if I'd read them last year (and not 23 years ago), but I can also see, in my mind's eye, the chair I was sitting on and the table I was sitting at while reading them. All of these books were devoured by my second-grade self in fifteen-minute-or-so increments before my school day started. They got my mind racing and opened up a world of possibilities to me. Sadly, Sleator died in 2011. I found out about this on Facebook from a respects-paying post made by a friend I went to elementary school with. I had no idea he was a Sleator fan. But I felt a sense of comradery that someone else had had their childhood enriched by these wonderful stories.

This novel will be literary fiction, although there will be a heavy influence from the sci-fi genre. Sci-fi has always been my favorite genre. I love the idea that there are no rules. Sci-fi and fantasy often get looked down upon, but a good story is a good story. It shouldn't matter

[u11] Delete: העריות עם

[u12] העריות עם: You are welcome to discuss genres here but in a less personal manner. Give definitions, examples of classics, and how your work will echo these (or not).

מעוצב:גופן: 11 נק', גופן עברית ושפות אחרות: 11 נק', סמן

מעוצב:סמן

מעוצב:גופן: 11 נק', גופן עברית ושפות אחרות: 11 נק', סמן

that it doesn't take place in "reality". Plot, character development, writing style, and the other things that make writing good are still the most important aspects of any story, regardless of whether it takes place in reality or not. I've never been a fan of hard sci-fi. Copious description bores me. A novel like *Dune*? A lot of sci-fi fans think it's a masterpiece. I don't. To me, sci-fi (and fantasy) isn't about aliens or spaceships. It's about nothing being sacred. One small change in reality can have far-reaching consequences. And, in fact, sometimes sci-fi does a much better job at highlighting the way humans and our reality behave. In terms of how sci-fi will influence this novel, I've created a sci-fi series similar to Star Wars or Star Trek that the main character and his friends are huge fans of. In addition, I will seriously consider writing in something that is fantastic or "rule breaking". Seeing as the requirement of the thesis is to be literary fiction, the only simple way I can see to work in something of this sort is to include fantastic dream sequences for Gavin. However, it can't come across as cliché or trite. I know that dreams can be a trap for beginning authors.

[ט13] הערות עם: Not relevant.

[ט14] הערות עם: I don't agree – excellent genre lit could be as appropriate as lit fiction. Emphasis on excellence.

In order for readers to enjoy *The Pebble of Battipaglia*, the characters will need to be believable. One advantage I have in crafting the characters in this novel is that I am a middle and high school teacher, and as someone who has not forgotten what it is like to be that age. From what I have noticed after comparing myself to other teachers, something I stress more than most is identifying with the students. I try as much as possible to be empathetic and understanding. Being the in-charge adult does not mean that I need to act superior. I never talk down to my students unless they act in a way which forces me to. I make sure to refer to them as "students" and not "children." I have not forgotten what it is like to be a 7th grader or 12th grader or anything in between. I know that school is often the last thing my students are thinking about, even when they are looking up at me and writing down what I put on the board. They could be thinking about that person they have a crush on, the cool thing they are doing after school, the joke their friend just made, or any of a host of other things that are important yet

~~unrelated to class.~~ This empathetic/identifying perspective should help me tap into the characters and make them more believable.

Comedies, and humor in general, have always been my favorite type of media. My favorite TV show is a British show called *Garth Marenghi's Darkplace*. There are only six episodes. There were only meant to be six. The writing is brilliant. Utterly brilliant. Almost every time I rewatch an episode, I pick up something new which I hadn't noticed before. A lot of the writing and ideas from the show have permeated my humor, and I'm sure that they come out when I write, whether I intend for them to or not.

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As a teacher who loves writing, I love seeing my students write. In as humble a way as possible, I wish for this novel to inspire young adults to write. The writer who has inspired me the most is Philip K. Dick. I don't remember the first Dick story that I read, but once I started, I was hooked. Dick's short stories and novels tackle many themes and ideas. Often times, empathy is a major theme or focus. But beyond the themes, Dick had an ability to take a world

מעוצב: גופן: 11 נק', גופן עברית ושפות אחרות: 11 נק'

**[ט18]** הערות עם No. Use this only if you can analyze how and why this is helpful to your writing.

מעוצב: גופן: 11 נק', גופן עברית ושפות אחרות: 11 נק'

מעוצב: מרווח בין שורות: כפול

מעוצב: גופן: 11 נק', גופן עברית ושפות אחרות: 11 נק'

or reality very very different from our own and almost seamlessly transport you there. Within no time, you were in the world, no matter how strange or foreign it should seem. One of his more famous works, *The Man in the High Castle*, isn't even classical sci fi. It's an alternate history (which is technically considered sci fi even if all the "rules of reality" are obeyed). It explores the lives of a few people living in a world where Germany and Japan won World War Two. Within no time, you are in the world. Dick does this by two means. Mean one is his attention to the little details. For example, one of the protagonists smokes "Land-O-Smiles" brand marijuana cigarettes. A lot of authors would stop at the fact that marijuana is legal. Others would stop at assuming that Camel or Marlboro is the brand. But Dick goes one step further and is simultaneously able to poke fun at marketing/consumerism *and* add an extra little bit of authenticity that shows that this world is "real". Mean two is exposition whose aim is to be as short and integrated into the story as possible. In *Man in the High Castle*, Dick integrates the explanation to the reader of what has happened in this alternate history into kind of an existential pondering of one of the characters during a moment of crisis. It doesn't feel added in or unnatural. Contrary to how he accomplished it here, Dick tended to avoid exposition if at all possible. He trusted that if his details were good enough, then the reader would be comfortable. In the fictional universe of *The Pebble of Battipaglia*, there will be elements which are foreign enough to warrant some kind of explanation. I will attempt to keep the exposition as minimal as possible.

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מעוצב:גופן: 11 נק', גופן עברית ושפות אחרות: 11 נק'



sarcastic/dark sense of humor shine. Thirdly, the way the plot twists and turns and the way the characters develop is simply brilliant. Something that Dick achieves here (along with some other of his novels) is getting the reader super comfortable and trusting of what's going on and then pulling the rug out from under them, leaving them wondering how much of what they've read is real or not. It's a kind of uneasiness that many authors try to effect in their readers but few do. *Scanner Darkly* inspires me. It shows me that writing can be beautiful, entertaining, funny, moving, thought provoking, and much more. Although a fantastic movie was made from this novel, this book is the first book I would point to in order to say, "This is why writing is relevant. This is a reason to open a book." Upon its completion, *The Pebble of Battipaglia* will be born into a world in which being a middle or high school nerd or geek is not a death knell for social status. Liking sci-fi franchises, playing video games, and wanting to learn are not contraindicative with being cool. As John Cheese points out, "[E]verything that used to be a geek hobby is now everyone's hobby."<sup>3</sup> However, many high school students, and especially the ones who consider themselves nerds, are worried about their social status and lack self confidence. As with the vast majority of 9th graders, our protagonist, Gavin, is going through that awkward transitional phase between old child and young adult. Compounding matters is that he is already pretty awkward. He is confident when discussing girl characters in a sci-fi movie but not confident when talking to real, actual girls. He is confident when busting his friends' "chops" but not confident when meeting potential friends. Unfortunately for Gavin, the big, scary world of high school does not care. He will either need to conquer his awkwardness or let it consume him.

As a graduate of middle and high school magnet programs which stressed science, math, and computer education, I am intimately familiar with this kind of student and their

<sup>3</sup> Cheese, John. "5 Things Modern Kids Don't Understand About Being a 'Nerd'."

מעוצב:גופן: 11 נק', נטוי, גופן עבירי ושפות אחרות: 11 נק', נטוי

Footnote source: הערות עם [u19]

מעוצב:גופן: 11 נק', גופן עבירי ושפות אחרות: 11 נק', לא סמן

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מעוצב:גופן: 11 נק', גופן עבירי ושפות אחרות: 11 נק', לא סמן

Move to Conceptual Background: הערות עם [u20]

מעוצב:לא סמן

environment. In a way, I hope that the me of eighteen years ago would both enjoy and benefit from this novel.

### **3. Shape of the Project**

~~details about length, plot structure, chapters etc., and also any writing dilemmas/challenges you already have or anticipate.~~

account” after just having graduated high school. This will give him 4 years of perspective while still allowing him to sound immature (to us, not necessarily to him). Even though 9th grade Gavin is awkward and not too great at communicating with new people, just-graduated Gavin is confident and willing to speak his mind. The key to making this narration work will be striking a balance between Gavin’s 9th grade thoughts/feelings (from the time the events of the story take place) and his just-graduated thoughts/feelings (from the time of the writing). I still have not figured out the exact balance that I want. I a’m sure much tweaking and knob-turning will take place during editing.

The events of the story will take place over the course of a year in the life of the protagonist as he is ~~plot will follow that of a typical coming-of-age story. Our immature protagonist will be~~ thrust into an unfamiliar situation which will cause him to grow, mature, and change. ~~The only difference between this story and a true coming-of-age story is that this one only encompasses one year of the protagonist’s life. Gavin will grow, mature, and change, but he will only do so from an immature 14 year old to a less-immature 15 year old.~~ The novel will be split into different five sections ~~and subdivided into~~ which contain chapters short enough to appeal to young readers ~~chapters. At present, I a~~’m leaning toward five sections with around five chapters each. Each chapter would be around 1,500-2,000 words. The reason for splitting up the novel this way is to make it easier to digest for the average kid. In general, kids like seeing progression and “leveling up.” Every chapter and section finished is like a notch in the reader’s belt. However, if there are too many chapters, then it might seem daunting. My gut tells me that 5 sections of 5 chapters is about right. The first section will be before the school year starts and an introduction to the main characters. The next section will be an introduction to the school and new characters. The third section and fourth sections will introduce problems with school and the family. And the last section will solve the problems and wrap up the story.

**[u21] הערות עמ:** Please get rid of all the contractions in your proposal; they are good for writing speech, not narrative and certainly not academic writing.

In addition to the main character, there will be three principle side characters. Two of them are Gavin's closest friends, Tony and Dustin. Tony has been Gavin's best friend since kindergarten. He is a loudmouth and prone to exaggeration. Dustin is laid back and comes across as a simpleton, but secretly, he is a genius. Gavin and Tony befriended him two years prior. Dustin comes from a rough family background, but he has become close enough with Gavin's family to be considered akin to Gavin's adopted brother. The third principle side character is Bilqis, whom Gavin meets early in the school year. Bilqis is the daughter of two hippies. She has just moved to the area. Bilqis is the wild card of the story. Quirky and outgoing, she is integral in causing Gavin to stop caring as much about what others think and to have confidence in being himself. Midway through the story, Bilqis develops romantic feelings toward Gavin. However, he is too oblivious to realize this, having had a crush on another girl for a couple of years already.

In addition to these three principle side characters, there will be other side characters with lesser roles. They can be split into two groups: other school acquaintances and family. The first group will consist mainly of friends or friends of friends whom Gavin meets at school or through social functions outside of school. Many adventures are had, including, but not limited to, a LAN party, a trip to a sci-fi movie dressed as characters from the movie, and a board game tournament at the local hobby shop.

The second group will consist of Gavin's family or close relations of the family. Gavin ~~has a healthy family life's family is about as far from dysfunctional as can be~~, something ~~which~~ he takes for granted. His parents are happily married. His brother, Lenny, who was an academic and athletic star during his time at school, is well-liked by everyone. Gavin has a ~~grandpa~~ grandfather who is still alive and in good health. Gavin has a dog. But juxtaposed against this well-functioning family are families that are dysfunctional. Lenny's girlfriend has a terrible relationship with her parents. Dustin's parents are ~~about as MIA as parents can be while still keeping in contact with him~~ negligent. He lives with his ~~grandma~~ grandmother when he is not

sleeping at Gavin's family's house. Finally, about two thirds of the way through the novel, Lenny tries to commit suicide. This attempt is thwarted by Gavin himself, partly due to fortunate circumstances. This suicide attempt gives Gavin new perspective. Though Gavin's problems do not go away, he gains the maturity necessary to tackle them.

The three writing challenges I foresee in writing this are determining how much narrated perspective vs narrating perspective to employ, how in depth to describe/include the lesser side characters, and how much time to spend on the different plot elements. These challenges I anticipate will become less challenging the more I write. There is one more challenge that I foresee: editing. This challenge frightens me the most. For the purposes of this thesis, I will probably only be able to edit this novel enough for me to be proud of it. Being proud of something you write and being happy with it are two different things though.

**[ט22] הערות עמ:** As an educator, did you know that this is the one problem that educators are discouraged from talking about with students? That it is the most dangerous to deal with in class? Bringing it into a novel is very dicey, and you should have a very good reason for doing, as well as the ability to carry it off.

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~~Sleator, William. *House of Stairs*. E.P. Dutton, 1974.~~

~~Sleator, William. *Interstellar Pig*. Bantam Spectra, 1986.~~

~~Sleator, William. *Singularity*. Bantam Spectra, 1986.~~

[u23] הערות עם: Add any CW writing books, writing guides, articles, etc. that have helped you along the way.