

AUTHOR INTERVIEW (CONTINUED)

4. What research did you do for this story?

I read as much as I could about the two real chimp experiments in the 1970s: Project Nim and Project Washoe. Often, the people who were involved in these experiments went on to write books about their experiences, and their stories are fascinating. In some ways, the events are much stranger than anything I could invent from my imagination!

I wanted to know as much as possible about baby chimps, and how they were raised both in the wild and by humans. I learned a little sign language. I watched films about chimpanzees and how they've been used and abused by humans for the purposes of human advancement, like the NASA space program, or for drug testing. I visited a chimpanzee sanctuary outside Montreal called the Fauna Foundation, which is a wonderful home for chimps who were once used in biomedical experiments or in the entertainment industry, and who became too old or ill to be of any further "use" to their human hosts.

5. Tell us about your next project.

I'm writing a Gothic adventure romance novel about the teenage years of Victor Frankenstein—imagining what might have happened to him in his youth to turn him into a scientist who tried to raise corpses from the dead and create human life!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenneth Oppel is the Governor General's Award-winning author of the Airborn series and the Silverwing Saga, which has sold over a million copies worldwide. He lives in Toronto with his wife and their three children. Visit his website at www.kennethoppel.com.



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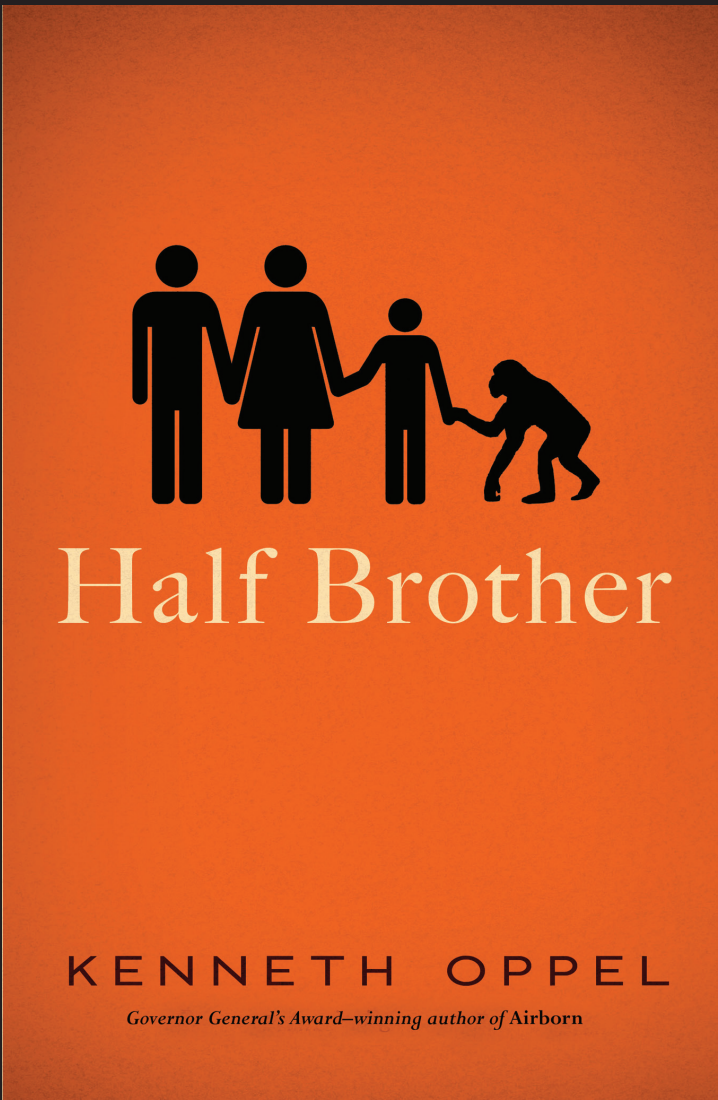
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DISCUSSION GUIDE

Half Brother

by Kenneth Oppel



ABOUT THE BOOK

When Ben Tomlin’s mother brings home an eight-day-old chimpanzee, Ben is far from thrilled. His father, a behavioural scientist, has moved the family to Victoria, B.C., so he can pursue a high-profile experiment—to determine whether chimpanzees can learn human sign language. But Ben is soon won over, helping with the research and treating the chimp, named Zan, as though he were a part of the family. Then the project unexpectedly loses its funding, and Ben’s father may have to abandon the experiment—and Zan. Ben must risk everything—his reputation, his friendships, and even his family—to save his baby brother.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ben decides to be the dominant male at his new school. In the dining hall on his first day, he plays up his reputation as the “chimp boy” (p. 77), and though at first everyone laughs at him, they are soon “looking at him differently” (p. 79). Why did they change towards him? What do you think it takes to be the dominant one in a group? Are there different ways to be dominant? Explain.
2. Dr. Tomlin is the dominant male at home, even biting Zan to show his power. Thinking about what it takes to discipline young children, is this reasonable? Is there a dominant member of your family? What does he or she do to maintain his or her dominance?
3. When Ben kisses Shannon he thinks, “She likes me so much, I could control her. I could make her do anything I want” (p. 309). Why does he feel this way? Does liking someone mean being under their control? Can two people in a relationship share power?
4. Ben’s mother often stands up for him, but she also takes part in many of the things that bother Ben—from taking Zan away from his real mother to breastfeeding Zan—at her husband’s request and for her own research. Do you think she has power in her family? If so, in what ways? What would you do if you were in her position, stuck between loved ones who don’t get along?

5. Dr. Tomlin doesn’t believe there is room for feelings in science. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

6. Jennifer accuses Ben of treating her as though she were his chimp. Would you be flattered or uncomfortable if you learned a classmate was studying you? Would you feel differently if the person were someone you had a crush on?

7. Jennifer says she and Ben “had no chemistry” (p. 226). Ben understands it as signals—“hormones and smells and tastes” (p. 227)—that animals use to choose a mate. How important is chemistry in a relationship?

8. Peter describes Zan’s situation—being taken from the wild and brought up as a human—as a “kind of slavery” (p. 161). What does he mean by this? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

9. Dr. Tomlin argues that animal testing is important because it advances “human science” (p. 341), producing drugs and therapies that help people. Ben is conflicted, disturbed by William Eckler’s lecture on the horrors of animal testing, but realizing it would be “hypocritical to worry about animals’ feelings or how we treated them” (p. 166) since he isn’t vegetarian. Do you feel guilty about eating animals or wearing leather goods? Why or why not? How do you feel about animal testing? If you are against it, does your opinion change if the animals are treated well?

10. Ben’s dictionary defines a person as an “individual human being” (p. 158), which means Zan is not a person. What do you think about this definition? How would you define a person?



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1. Why did you set *Half Brother* in 1973?

Half Brother was inspired by a couple of famous experiments that took place in the early 1970s, in which scientists tried to teach chimpanzees sign language. The experiments were very controversial—and their results are still disputed to this day—and have never been repeated, so it wouldn’t have felt right trying to set the story today, or in any other time. Also, setting the story in the 1970s was a way for me to write about my own childhood—and some of my own experiences got worked into the story in interesting ways!

2. This is your first book set specifically in Canada. Why did you choose Victoria?

I grew up on both coasts of Canada, but mostly in Victoria. Since *Half Brother* takes place roughly during the time of my own childhood (Ben would have been born in 1960; and I was actually born in 1967!), I felt a desire to return to the setting of my teenage years. It enabled me to use all sorts of little details that helped create a very realistic world for my readers; and it also helped me to re-enter the mind of a young teenager. In most ways Ben’s life is totally unlike my own; but let’s just say we have a few shared experiences!

3. Many of your stories feature animals—from bats to more fantastical creatures like the cloud cats in *Airborn*. Where does this fascination with animals come from?

It’s strange, because I don’t really consider myself an “animal person.” I don’t have pets myself and have always lived in cities where wildlife is usually confined to birds, squirrels, and raccoons. In my earlier books, the animals were a way of allowing me to enter or create alternate worlds—the nocturnal world of bats, or an airborne world with its own fantastical flora and fauna. *Half Brother* was inspired by very real events from my own world. When I was at university, I took an anthropology course and learned about a linguistics experiment in which a young chimp was raised as a human child, to see if it could learn sign language. After two years, the project was abandoned, and the chimp was literally stripped of its human identity and put in a cage. He’d first been told he was a human and then was told to go back to being a chimp. I thought it was a really poignant story, and it stayed with me for over 20 years, and inspired *Half Brother*.