



# English Teacher Joel Morris Takes Love

BY CARLY PHILPOTT

Editor-in-Chief

**C**reek English teacher Dr. Joel Morris teaches nearly 100 15-year-olds the story of *Macbeth* every year, leading spirited discussions, screening the 2010 film version, and grading many students' hot takes in the form of essays. But for the past few years, Morris has been delving into *Macbeth* on his own time too – writing a novel from the perspective of Lady Macbeth, which serves as a prequel to the Shakespearean play.

The story is based on details found when closely examining *Macbeth* and what historians have been able to find on the actual Lady Macbeth, who the play is based off of, and the son and family she had before the play.

"She has that one kind of throw-away line about how she knows what it means to love the baby that she's nursing" Morris said. "And so that just got me interested, because...there's no other mention in the play of children."

In his story, Morris focuses on Lady Macbeth's own tragedy.



At age five, Morris dictates a story to his dad to go with his illustrations.

"Her childhood is really kind of based on what it's like to be a woman or girl growing into a woman in an age in a place that is dominated by men," he said. "So she's trying to navigate the misogyny...and the brutality of that world and raise her son in that world as well."

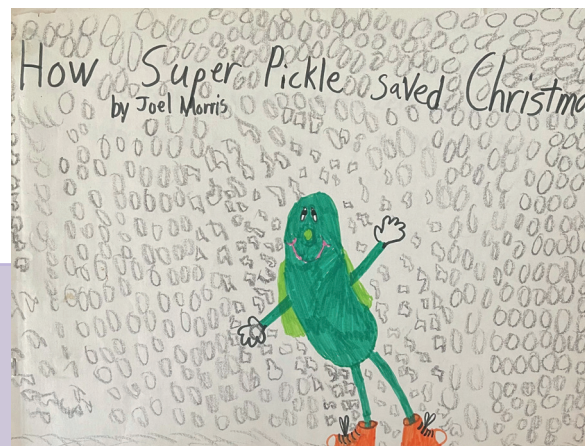
Morris worked with The Bent Agency, based in New York and London, to edit his book and get it into the hands of publishers. Eventually, he got a deal with G.P. Putnam's Sons, a prestigious imprint of Penguin Group. He expects the book to be released in 2024.

This may be the first book he's publishing, but for Morris, it's far from his creative writing debut. In fact, he says, he's been creating stories before he could even write himself.

"Before I could write, I remember sitting on the couch with my dad,"

"I kept telling myself for the longest time, all I wanted to do is be able to walk into a book store and see [my] book on a shelf."

English teacher & author  
Dr. Joel Morris



A page from one of Morris' stories, "How Super Pickle Saved Christmas," shows his character, Super Pickle.

Morris said. "I would draw these books. My first character was called Hankie. He was a yellow dog, and he would get into all kinds of trouble and stuff. And I would dictate to my dad and he would write the text of it."

Morris's history with Shakespeare is also extensive, but it wasn't *Macbeth* that caught his attention first. He recalls reading *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet* as a high schooler. But in college, Morris dug deeper into *Macbeth*. "I took a class my freshman year called Women in Shakespeare," he said. "That was where I first met Lady Macbeth."

Morris shares his office in East with two other Shakespeare aficionados, English teachers Mhari Doyle and Jason Foster. According to Doyle, the three spend a lot of time discussing the Shakespeare they teach – all three teach *Macbeth* in English 10 Honors –

Morris' first publication, a short story and poem, appears in the literary journal at Colorado College during the first semester of his freshman year.

# of Writing, 'Macbeth' Into New Novel

and how they can dig deeper into the characters so students understand them better.

One of these characters is Lady Macbeth. "She's not just a straight up villain, right?" Doyle said. "There's so much more that's kind of motivating what she's like, and why she does the things that she does. I think that there are tons of politicians who've been labeled as a Lady Macbeth, because they're powerful women, or...because they are power hungry. So we talk about those types of issues."

Morris was inspired to analyze *Macbeth* from Lady Macbeth's perspective in part because he read a counterpart to Beowulf as a senior, written from monster Grendel's perspective. He said it "blew my mind as a high school senior."

"And so I've always kind of been fascinated by those alternate stories," Morris said. "It just really opened things wide for me in terms of like, wow, how cool can you take the basic text or the core text, and then give it a different perspective?"

After finishing his manuscript this summer, Morris got in contact with The Bent Agency, which has sponsored bestsellers such as, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *The Night Tiger* by Yangsze Choo and countless others. James Mustelier, a literary agent who has worked with Morris, said that the story immediately caught his attention.

"There's a very clear voice right from the start there," Mustelier said.

"You can feel a lot about the two protagonists just through the voice without being told a lot of specifics about their lives."

Normally, Mustelier says, the editing process from when the agency first starts looking at a book to when it gets sent off to publishers can take months to over a year. For Morris, Mustelier says it took "maybe three weeks or so."

"I think that really just has to do with how polished the book was from the start," Mustelier said, "and how well conceived the project was."

Mustelier says that he has enjoyed working with Morris directly. "Joel was really passionate about discussing his work and discussing Shakespeare," he said. "I think that passion comes through and is inspiring to other people. It makes other people really want to work with him and believe in him



even more, just to feel that emotion connected with the creative work that he's doing."

Mustelier and The Bent Agency connected Morris with Putnam, which has published fiction authors such as Mike Lupica, Tom Clancy, W.E.B. Griffin, and Delia Owens. With this publisher and the story he wrote, Mustelier believes Morris is well on his way to a successful book.

"It's something that's both well-written and has a lot of depth and nuance to it, but that is exploring a character that I think a lot of people are really interested in," Mustelier said.

Morris hopes that the potential success of this book will lead him into more writing projects, maybe even more Shakespeare-inspired works, and other originals. With his current deal with Putnam, the publishing company will get first dibs on any of his future contracts, meaning he has a good shot of getting them published. Morris has another novel close to final draft stage, which he wants to try to publish in the next three or four years.

But with his *Lady Macbeth* novel, Morris has likely already accomplished one of his long standing goals.

"I kept telling myself for the longest time, all I wanted to do is be able to walk into a book store and see [my] book on a shelf," Morris said. "That's all I cared about. But I don't know. I mean, I think time will tell."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DR. JOEL MORRIS  
TIMELINE BY CARLY PHILPOTT, NICK RUI & EMILY GLEASON

Morris visits Athens, Greece around the time he publishes his short story, "Grizzly Bears," in the *American Literary Review*.

Morris expects his *Lady Macbeth* novel to be published.

Morris takes a "Women in Shakespeare" class in the spring semester of his freshman year of college.

Morris starts teaching *Macbeth* to his classes for the first time.



1979

1984

1993

1994

2003

2013

2024

March 2023

