



INTERVIEW WITH RENOWNED HUMORIST **MIKE THALER**, THE RIDDLE KING HIMSELF.

Mike is the author of Black Lagoon picture books & Black Lagoon Adventures chapter books. Mike is a legend in children's publishing. His first book was acquired all the way back in 1961 by famed editor Ursula Nordstrom – the same editor who worked with children's literature luminaries such as E. B. White, Margaret Wise Brown, Crockett Johnson, Syd Hoff, Maurice Sendak, Shel Silverstein, and Laura Ingalls Wilder, among others. Read our interview to learn about Mike's early career, the inspiration behind the Black Lagoon series, tips for using the books in the classroom, and more.

INTERVIEW WITH MIKE THALER:

ABDO: Mike, thanks for joining us! Spotlight is so excited to bring your fantastic Black Lagoon stories and characters to libraries and schools in our high-quality editions. Can you tell us when and how you first got the idea for the Black Lagoon series?

MT: The idea for the title *The Teacher from the Black Lagoon* came from the title of the movie *The Creature from Black Lagoon*. One day I realized that *teacher* rhymes with *creature*, so I substituted it and I had a great title. The book, however, took three years to create.

ABDO: We know the Black Lagoon series has been such a popular series with kids, teachers, and librarians. Tell us more about your amazing career in children's books!

MT: I have been blessed to be able to write children's books for 51 years. Since I am only 36, that is quite an amazing feat! My first book, *Magic Boy*, was published in 1961. It has been followed by over 200 books for children, consisting of picture books, I-Can-Read books, riddle books, and many series including *Happily Ever Laughter*, *It's Me Hippo*, *Funny Firsts*, and *The Bully Brothers*.



At the age of 60, God inspired me to write two series: *Heaven & Mirth*, which are funny Bible stories, and most recently, *Tales From the Back Pew*, which takes a Lagoon look at church life from a kid's perspective.

I believe the most important things about my books are that they have a morally sound base and make kids laugh.

The books that I am most known for are the Black Lagoon series. They have been an integral part of school life for over 23 years. This series consists of 25 picture books and 21 chapter books, which to date have sold over 19 million copies.

ABDO: *What are some of your favorite stories and authors to read?*

MT: My two favorite children's books are *The Little Engine That Could* and *Ferdinand the Bull*. To me these are incredibly simple, but both carry a profound message. When I'm faced with a hard situation, I still say, "I think I can. I think I can. I think I can."

When kids ask me, "What is my favorite book in all the world?" I always answer, "The Bible." And when they ask, "Who is your favorite author?" I answer, "God."

ABDO: *Was there a special teacher or librarian who influenced your life and got you on the path to literature, writing, and reading?*

MT: When I was a kid many years ago, every Friday night my family would go to the library. Eventually after going through every picture book in the kid's section, I asked the librarian if there were any picture books in the adult section. She led me to the *New Yorker* cartoon annuals. These books inspired my first career as a cartoonist, which grew into writing children's books.

Ursula Nordstrom, at Harper Brothers, saw a cartoon Christmas story called *The Fallen Star* that I had done for *Harper's Bazaar* and called me about doing a children's book. I immediately made an appointment for the next day, since the rent was due. I sat down that evening, folded eight pieces of paper and wrote *Magic Boy*. Ursula loved it, bought it, and published it, and I paid the rent.

Since Ursula, there have been many editors who have loved and believed in my work, among them Jean Feiwel, who first put Jared Lee and I together 30 years ago to collaborate on a book called *A Hippo Ate the Teacher*.

ABDO: *Our new Black Lagoon Teacher's Guide is filled with great activities for teachers and librarians to expand learning opportunities with these great books. Can you share some advice for teachers and librarians who use your books?*

MT: I have heard from many kindergarten and first grade teachers that they use the Black Lagoon series to teach the different school jobs and introduce the staff to their kids. One day the principal will come in and read his book, the next day the school nurse, etc., etc. Many school librarians introduce themselves to new classes by reading *The Librarian from the Black Lagoon*. Also the *Substitute Teacher from the Black Lagoon* has been valuable for breaking the ice with a new class. Kids can also easily follow the Black Lagoon format to write their own Black Lagoon-inspired stories.

ABDO: *Thanks so much for being here, Mike!*

MT: I hope that this series, so beautifully printed by ABDO in library editions, will bless you and your kids.