

EDWARD KAY COMBINES COMEDY, SCIENCE, AND SLEUTHING IN ADDISON

By Diane Wild

A novelist, journalist, and television writer, with credits ranging from sketch comedy to animation to science, for audiences ranging from young children to young adults to grownups, Edward Kay's resume demonstrates an impressive diversity.

After a stint on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, Kay wrote the animated series *Olliver's Adventures* and *Jimmy Two-Shoes* as well as the TVO show *Finding Stuff Out*.

He points out that there aren't many timeslots for Canadian comedy shows, but there are many more opportunities — and a more global audience — in animation. "It's true that in Canada the more hats you can wear the more likely you are not to live under a bridge, but I really do have a lot of interests," he says. "You only have so much time, so part of the challenge is focusing on a few different things you do really well and not go too far afield."

His latest focus is *Addison*, a CBC Kids comedic animated series featuring a girl, around six years old, who solves mysteries and builds quirky inventions

using creative problem solving, cooperation, and perseverance. The mysteries usually revolve around a natural phenomenon mistaken for a nefarious deed, and Addison's strength is evaluating information rather than being an encyclopedic genius. Her vulnerability is in jumping to conclusions, so each episode she needs to take a break — by building a complex Rube Goldberg machine, for example — re-evaluate and try again.

"Girls tend to drop out of science and math more so than boys in late middle schools years, and the theory is it's because they're embarrassed at making mistakes," says Kay. "Discovery is a process and some of it is accidental. We show that part of the process is to make mistakes, and you don't give up there."



Edward Kay's current project is Addison, an animated series on CBC, about a six-year-old who solves mysteries

Blue's Clues creator Traci Paige Johnson came up with the idea for *Addison*, seeing it as a way of encouraging girls toward science and technology. Producer Charles Bishop, who worked with Kay on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, knew he would be a great fit to bring the idea to life with CBC Kids, where it had been in development but not yet green-lit. Besides his background in writing for comedy and science shows, Kay's *STAR Academy* novels are about a scientifically brilliant girl, written in part to provide a role model for his now 14-year-old daughter Mika.

A single father since she was much younger, Kay is attuned to the subtle ways entertainment can send messages, positive and negative, to girls. He wrote most of the first season of 20 episodes on his own, but

he's noticed an interesting phenomenon as he works with other writers for the 30-episode second season.

"Sometimes writers, both male and female, will give the more active, decision-making dialogue to the boys in the series, even though Addison is the star and the leader of her 'tribe' of kids," he notes. "It has happened often enough to be observable, and I have had to point out to them that Addison is the star, and so not to have boys automatically be the one to leap into the fray first or say, 'Let's go!' to Addison and lead her to the next scene. I try to imagine someone ordering Batman around."

"I have occasionally had the same issue with some — not all — of the board artists. I have had to send notes back pointing out that since Addison is



Addison is an animated series on CBC featuring a six-year-old who meets any challenges on her quest to solve mysteries with her own inventions

the star of the show, she shouldn't be at the edge of a particular frame while the boys are in the centre."

The educational aspect of the show is most visible in its attention to natural phenomenon, but Kay credits CBC with encouraging him to think of the show as entertainment rather than curriculum. "We avoid that moment where someone explains that migratory birds always fly south. You'll never hear someone being didactic," he says. "There are very few people who wouldn't naturally pitch something that has an educational aspect to it. We ourselves are curious about nature and science, so we naturally gravitate to that. Our first job is to make kids laugh and keep them entertained, but do it in an intelligent fashion."

There's a lot to pack into each 11 minute episode, and there's no writers' room to break story together. Unlike his experience on *22 Minutes*, where writers were paid to come into the office, it takes a successful episode pitch for an *Addison* writer, so Kay works with them individually to hone their pitches and work toward a successful script.

He has a low-tech solution to bouncing ideas around and breaking story without being in the same space. "If we had money we would have a

writers' room, but because animation has smaller budgets and writers live all over Canada, we can't do that. But we can do phone calls." Despite writers' propensity to be introverts, he avoids the temptation to use email, which doesn't allow for the synergy of a conversation for riffing on ideas.

"It's a very idiosyncratic show. It's the most difficult show I've ever written for," he says.

He adds, *Addison* will always solve the mystery but she has to get it wrong at least twice, and there has to be a clue in the first scene everyone has overlooked.

"It's never really aliens, but it has to be interesting."

He gives the example of sewer construction in his neighbourhood, which resulted in cryptic blue and orange symbols scrawled on a three-block stretch of sidewalks. "As a kid, that's so weird. If I saw strange arrows and squiggly things pointing to people's houses, and if I had read something about the Nazca lines, which kids do, I might come to a different conclusion."

Kay also has an eight-year-old son whose constant flipping between television and iPad gives him a glimpse of the audience they're trying to reach.

"It's hard to believe we're having a conversation about keeping someone's attention for 11 minutes but that's what the world has turned into."

"They graze. It's terrifying not so much as a parent but as someone who makes television shows, because it's so easy to lose a kid."

He's become acutely aware of the need for action on screen when writing for this age group — not as in violence and car chases, but "clever shots that grab attention so kids don't wander away to send a text or go online."

Whether a pitch is accepted or not is often determined by how much visual information is conveyed. "You need to tell me what we will be looking at," he says. "I want to know what the mystery is, but I need to know what will be exciting for 11 minutes."

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Animation makes it easier to be surreal and be creative with the visual comedy, and to a degree he can leave some of that magic to the designers. "I know lots of people in live action who would kill to do these kind of Rube Goldberg machines we do," he says. "When I get the rough sketches I laugh out loud."

As a live-action showrunner Kay can be on set and collaborate with the director, director of photography, and actors to translate his scripts to screen. "With animation it's tougher and there's a lot more people involved. There's 60 animators sitting in a room and they don't even see each others' scenes, which makes it a challenge to make sure there's a continuity of feel. If you want something

in the right corner of the frame, out of focus in background, it's much easier in live action than sending notes to someone in a different time zone, which happens in animation."

Not that he's complaining, just pointing out a difference. "It's also really fun. There are things in animation you can't do in live action. You can't make crickets behave the way you want them to in real life, but in animation you can. And you can have comically outlandish things that in live action you'd need crazy expensive CGI."

He talks of the openness of animation directors to collaborate, and the animators embellishing in a "visual version of what a punch-up writer does on a script."

While he intended to have a viewing party for *Addison*'s premiere, he explains that given the back and forth process of animation, sound, music, "I've probably seen that episode 20, 25 times. That's the horrible part of doing television: you do it because you love it, but by the time it actually airs you just want it to go away."

That's one difference from *22 Minutes*, where the show aired days after it was shot. Another is the absence of that live audience. "But I have kids and I read them the scripts. If they laugh I know it's working. Kids are great that way. They won't fake it."

That doesn't mean he's done with adult themes. His most recent novel, *At Rope's End*, is a murder mystery that's been optioned by Seven24. "The world had entered a dark space and it wasn't something I could artistically address through kids' shows." ■