



Sad stuff: *Why We Broke Up*, inspired by romance-related ephemera collected by illustrator Maira Kalman, in turn spawned a Tumblr project

A SERIES OF FORTUNATE BREAKUPS

Daniel Handler's novel gets a boost when the sob stories start pouring in

BURNED BY a bad romance? Scarred from a messy relationship? Need to unload after a Kardashian, Klum or Kutcher-type split? Instead of drowning your sorrows, author Daniel Handler asks that you post them online.

The man formerly known as Lemony Snicket has created a Tumblr page, the *Why We Broke Up* Project, which invites visitors to post romantic sob stories for digital publication. Handler's request for submissions is simple: willing participants are asked to share the reason why they broke up with their respective exes. Blog tags such as "I can't believe how disgusting you were" and "I can't believe there was someone else" help over-sharers categorize their entries.

"For practical and therapeutic purposes, I'm glad the site is up," says the 41-year-old San Francisco-born author, who has personally responded to entries that move him. "For selfish reasons, too." That's because it was created to promote his latest book, *Why We Broke Up*, an illustrated young adult novel. "When I tell people about the book's premise—that it is about a dramatic teenage love affair that ends badly—it usually prompts them to launch into their own troubled story

of a former boyfriend or girlfriend."

Handler is best known for writing the successful children's books called *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. His jump into the young adult aisle was driven by a collaboration with artist Maira Kalman, who did the illustrations for the new book. "Maira collects so many things: bottle caps, matchboxes and all sorts of ordinary objects. They were made magical by her gaze and each piece had an infusion of romantic memory," he says. "Some of those objects became the nucleus of the story."

The book is about Minerva "Min" Green, a mature teen, and her loutish ex-boyfriend Ed Slaterton. The story is in the form of a letter that accompanies ephemera from Min and Ed's dates, such as movie stubs and a condom wrapper, that she sends to him when they break up. But just like the protagonist in screenwriter Diablo Cody's 2007 film *Juno*, Min's witty, sarcastic and often dry voice has attracted older readers.

"As I started to read the Tumblr posts on the *Why We Broke Up* Project, I realized that not only are there so many heartbroken, long-winded people who can be considered versions of Min that are exactly Min's age, but there are more women responding to the book and site who have grown out of their teenage years," says Handler. "They seem to be the ones that consistently keep adding to our viral collection of breakup stories."

Although the Tumblr site was meant to be a marketing tool, it has now logged more than 1,200 entries and an average of 12 stories are added every day. The posts cover a wide range: resentful ("I always put you first. And so did you"), jilted ("You ran away with my best friend"), superficial ("No one wants to marry a 28-year-old man without a job"), disturbing ("You abused the kids")

and comical ("I secretly hated your creepy moustache"). Thanks to the success of both the site and book, Handler was asked to help guide the lonely-heart set in other ways. "Yesterday, I spent two hours counselling the lovelorn on the *Huffington Post's* Twitter account," he laughs. "I doubt anybody actually took me seriously, though." Then again, when asked, "What's the best revenge for a scorned lover?" he answered, "A successful literary career."

Handler definitely struck a nerve with the book, as people interested in *Why We Broke Up* "feel compelled to tell their own story any which way they can." But contributors beware. Some of those stories are fodder for the author's imagination. Handler is obsessed with the story of a man who called in to a radio station when he was doling out advice to the lovelorn on his book tour. "He had a last breakfast with his girlfriend Marlena. When she broke up with him and left him that morning, he saved the grapefruit she was eating—she only ate half of it. He told me he wrapped up the fruit in cellophane and kept it in the freezer for 11 years. It really is the kind of thing that is bound to show up in one of my books." **ELIO IANNACCI**



Pseudonym snub

Handler came up with Lemony Snicket out of the blue, likely a play on the "cheerful, overly moralistic" Jiminy Cricket he despises.