
**Emil Ostrovski** emigrated to the US from Russia when he was two years old. He graduated from Vassar College in the spring of 2012 and is now attending Columbia University’s MFA program for creative writing. *The Paradox of Vertical Flight* is his first novel.

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**Lauren Myracle**: Emil, you are one smart dude, and as an author, you have created in Jack another awfully smart dude. Jack’s also a loner, and at one point in the novel he’s an almost-pill-popper with the goal of almost killing himself. His self-inflicted isolation seems directly related to his crazy-smart brain relentlessly grinding its crazy-smart gears, because it’s hard to be smart sometimes. There’s a question my friends and I often asked each other in high school, and I’d love to hear your answer, in all seriousness: Would you, Emil, rather be smart or kind? And no, you can’t say/suggest/or in any other clever way circle around to saying “both.”

**Emil Ostrovski**: As a kid, I never really thought of myself as smart. Other things, like soccer-playing ability, were, I judged, *far* more important. School and grades and why I’d gotten a C in fourth grade art and the grammar lessons my father tried to subject me to (I remember being very
much perplexed by the rather metaphysical definition of a verb as “a state of being”) didn’t inform much of my identity. But as I grew older and it became more and more apparent that I would not, in fact, become a professional soccer player, or Tae Kwon Do grandmaster, I invested ever more of myself in this idea of being smart, or, specifically, book-smart. To the point that the younger Emil almost seems like a different person (perhaps a better one).

All this is to say, while I think it’s much more important to be kind than to be smart, if God or The Flying Spaghetti Monster or A Hyper-Intelligent Shade of the Color Blue descended from heaven and asked me to choose between the two, I’m not sure I’d have the strength of character to choose kindness. But surely, I think, kindness would be the right choice. It would be the choice I hope I would make. Because I believe kindness is more valuable than academic intelligence, and when I say valuable, I don’t mean it in a utilitarian way. I mean, simply, kindness is more meaningful, more beautiful. When I see a stranger help a mother lift her baby carriage up the subway steps, I think in that gesture, we get a glimpse of all human goodness—friendship, love, self-sacrifice.

And I know you said not to try to be clever, but I want to point out that perhaps kindness and empathy form a part of a different kind of intelligence. A social intelligence. Without academic intelligence we might not have computers, or planes, or, well, nuclear and biological weapons. Without social intelligence, or kindness, or empathy, or whatever you want to call it, we wouldn’t even be human.
Lauren: I’m not going to give away the plot of the book—though it is AWESOME—but I love the vulnerability of Jack’s claim that “gravity is a baby’s worst enemy.” I especially love it given the title of the novel, *The Paradox of Vertical Flight*. Please, sir, explain what you’re exploring here.

Emil: Well, the paradox of vertical flight is that, as human beings, the only way we can fly on our own power is vertically. In other words, flying is falling, and falling is flying. But the two words have different connotations. *Flying* we associate with being liberated, being free (dare I say) as a bird. *Falling* we associate with failure. But in reality, we cannot be free, unless we open ourselves up to the possibility and inevitability of failure. We cannot fly in our lives unless we choose to fall, to fail. Flying functions as a metaphor, in part, for faith. Not necessarily a religious faith, but at least, finding something to believe in, whether it’s human goodness or the eternal beauty of finally scratching an itch that’s been bothering you all day.

Now, a baby, when it’s first born, has a universe of possibility open to it. It can fly in so many different ways, scratch so many different itches. And not just babies. Children do not know yet how to doubt. They believe they can be and do absolutely anything. The worst thing you can do to a baby or child is to limit it, to say, “You can’t be Superman, kid. You’re two feet tall, and just the other day, you started crying when your older brother put a spider in your soup.” That, to me, is what gravity represents. It’s a limiting force, one of the many ways in which the infinite universe tries to limit us. It is a denial of faith, which is a denial of our infinite potential. Gravity wants us to resign ourselves to falling rather than to trying to fly.
More concretely, gravity is an educational system that doesn’t give all students the same educational opportunities. It is the under-representation of women in movie roles other than that of “sexy-love-interest;” their under-representation too, in politics, in business, which in turn shapes the way young women view themselves. Gravity is a family that threatens to disown its child for being LGBTQ, or for loving someone of a different racial or ethnic group. Finally, gravity represents death and mortality—after all, what happened to Icarus when he succumbed to gravity? Well, he fell into the sea and drowned. Babies and gravity, it might be said, are polar opposites—the infinite potential of human beings juxtaposed with the limited time the universe has given us (after all, at a rate of 9.81 meters per second squared, we will impact the waters below in precisely. . .)

**Lauren**: The novel is a brilliant inquiry into the mystery of life. You’ve given this question an immense amount of thought, and so I ask you: What *is* the meaning of life, the universe, and everything? And you can’t say 42. ;)

**Emil**: Damn. I really, *really* wanted to say 42.

Okay.

Let me put it this way.

What Douglas Adams so brilliantly suggests in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is that we’ll never get a comprehensible answer to the question of what the meaning of life is unless we actually understand what it is we’re asking in the first place.
Otherwise, we could in fact, be posing an absurd question, akin to “How many giraffes will fit into a minivan?” (Answer: None, it’s packed full of hedgehogs.)

Perhaps what we mean by meaning is purpose. In which case, a question about the purpose of the universe, an inanimate thing, makes about as much sense as a question about the purpose of a rock out in your backyard.

A question about the purpose of life itself also doesn’t seem to make much sense. Perhaps different forms of life have different purposes, though? That’s what Aristotle thinks. He believes different forms of life all have distinguishing activities that allow them to thrive in different ways. A plant thrives by undergoing photosynthesis, and doing other plant-y things. A wolf thrives by being part of a pack, by hunting down prey. The distinguishing activity of human beings, on the other hand, is arguably the exercise of our rationality.

This rationality, I might argue, is what allows us to be free. Because we can reflect on our decisions, on possible outcomes, we have the ability to shape how we act in a way that other life forms can’t. Thus, perhaps the meaning or purpose of human life is to be free. But our rationality doesn’t simply liberate us. In a paradox of sorts (yes, more paradoxes!), it also constrains us. It makes demands upon us. If I don’t like being treated poorly, then I should not treat others poorly. Or, to put the thought more precisely, if I believe my unhappiness at being treated poorly is sufficient reason for people to not treat me poorly, then I should not act in such a way as to make others unhappy. After all, didn’t I just say I believe unhappiness at being treated poorly is sufficient cause for people not to treat me in this way? If I treat people poorly regardless, then
I’m a hypocrite, aren’t I? I’m making an inexplicable, rather convenient exception for myself. Thus, I’m acting contrary to reason, I’m failing to meet the (as it turns out) rather stringent demands of my rationality, which is tied to my very humanity.

So, perhaps the meaning or purpose of human life is to be free, but in order to be free, we must also be good, by according to others the same value that we accord to ourselves? This ties nicely into Plato’s belief that the beautiful and the good are very closely related—to say something is beautiful, for Plato, is to make a judgment about its goodness. Perhaps, then, our purpose is simply to live beautiful lives. To make of our lives a work of art.

Buddhist mandala paintings are a wonderful expression of this. Buddhist monks spend days or weeks constructing intricate sand paintings, and upon completion, they sweep the paintings away. What is beautiful is not simply the image that has been so meticulously crafted but the fact that the image’s destruction is planned from the very beginning. Destruction is the final part of the ritual. The art lies not simply in the painting itself but in the performance of the artist, as both creator and destroyer, a performance that symbolizes the impermanence, the ever-changing nature of existence. To me, this makes these paintings far more beautiful and powerful than any hanging in a museum.

**Lauren:** I debated asking this next question for quite a while. I really did. Then I decided that anyone who can tackle the riddle of life as authentically and deftly as you do can surely handle anything I throw your way. So here’s the thing. Jess, one of the main characters in the book, gives birth to a baby one day, and then the very day she’s whisked away by the winds of fate (or
perhaps the whims of her ex-boyfriend, Jack). But giving birth isn’t like having a throat culture done or getting a flu shot. There is pain afterward—lots of it. But although Jess at one point acknowledges that her body HURTS, the messy details of having just given birth aren’t addressed. What’s up with that? Is the fact that I’m hung up on this a male writer/female writer difference? Do you think there are differences between male writers and female writers?

**Emil:** The thing about writing from a first-person point of view is that you get trapped inside a character’s head for so long, to the point that it’s sometimes hard to see the story from a different perspective. Jack has so many things on his mind, abstract and concrete, from the fate of our ever-expanding universe to the little fact that he’s, well, kidnapped a baby. He doesn’t give as much thought to Jess and what she’s going through as he should, which is a failing on his part. And it’s a failing I didn’t really even notice until when, near the end of the book, Jack realizes he’s been a “Jack-ass” for being so oblivious. As the author, I sort of leaned back in my chair and thought, *Yeah, just a little bit. Perhaps we’ve both been.*

Now, in revision, there were certainly opportunities to make changes, but I admit that as a young male in my twenties, I was wary of how to accurately portray the female body post-pregnancy. Physiological nitty-gritties can be tough, simply because, when writing a character of the opposite sex, these things are not something you have personal experience with. On some level, I think, this must shape the way we write.

Having said that, I think the differences between male and female writers are most pronounced among amateur writers. Female writers sometimes make male characters a little too sensitive
(don’t get me wrong, boys can be sensitive, but they’re rarely very sensitive with one another).
And amateur male writers, sadly, often can’t write female characters at all. But among good, versatile writers, the difference between how males and females write largely evaporates, in my opinion.

**Lauren:** I’ll end by asking Jack, Jess, Tommy, and Socrates a question that’s on the lighter side—and I hope you’ll let each of them answer for him- or herself. Peeps, would you rather fight a duck the size of a horse or one hundred duck-sized horses?

**Tommy:** Man, what’s a duck doing the size of a horse, anyway? That’s what I want to know.

**Jack:** If one hundred duck-sized horses want to cross the road, then before they can cross the entire road, they would have to cross half the road, and before they can cross half the road, they would have to cross a quarter—

**Jess:** And before they crossed a quarter they’d probably get run over by a guy who drives like he’s in *Transporter 3.*

**Tommy:** HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU, JASON STATHAM’S GOT NOTHING ON THIS—

**Jess:** At least Jason Statham never ran over a poodle.
Tommy: For the last time, that poodle was jaywalking.

Jack: —and before they could cross a quarter, they would have to cross an eighth, before that a sixteenth, and it goes on and on, oh guys, guys, because there’s no smallest number. There’s no smallest number. How will the hundred duck-sized horses ever cross the road?

Socrates: When you think about it that way, neither of the two options is an issue. Just stand on the other side of the road. Neither the horses nor the duck will ever reach you.

Tommy: I don’t know, man. A hundred mini-horses. It’s like, a stampede. I don’t want to be caught in some mini-stampede.

Jack: But the horse-sized duck. That’s almost, mythic, you know? Something you’d see Athena riding or something.

Jess: Yeah, Jack. Because the Goddess of Wisdom has literally nothing better to do than to ride an oversized duck around in your imagination.

Socrates: Actually, you’d be surprised—

Emil: (Ahem). This has been fun but I really need to get to class. Final answers, please.

Jack: Well, as long as there’s a road between us I don’t see why it matters.
**Tommy:** Bring on the duck. I’ll just feed it really big bread crumbs.

**Jess:** In other words, actual slices of bread?

**Tommy:** Yeah, that.

**Jess:** I don’t know. I’d guess I’d just stomp on the little horses.

**Jack:** Or throw chairs at them.

**Jess:** No, darling, that I reserve exclusively for you.

**Socrates:** I will tame the duck. And then we will fly—

**Jack:** Horizontally!!