

A TOUR OF THE ESCAPE WITH CHRISTOPHER EDGE



DON'T READ THIS SECTION UNTIL YOU'VE FINISHED THE BOOK!

Want to find out more about the people, places, and ideas that inspired *RACE FOR THE ESCAPE*? Well, let's see if the author himself can give us the Answers we need!

Why did you write this book?

I wanted to write a story about the problems we face in the world today, but it was important to me that this story be a story of hope. From global warming to plastic pollution, young people are the ones who are raising their voices loudest about these problems, and they're also the ones who are showing the bravery and imagination we need to solve them. This gave me the idea for *The Escape*—an escape game where five young players have to work together to find the Answer to save the world.

Have you ever been to an escape room?

Yes! As part of the research for the book, I played several escape games, from searching for a lost archaeological artifact in a locked museum to trying to solve a mystery while trapped on a nuclear submarine! What I love about escape games is the way they completely immerse you in another reality. When you're playing an escape game, you're part of the story, and the decisions you make can mean the difference between success and failure, while the actions of the other people on your team can either help or hinder the escape! I wanted to give the readers of *Race for the Escape* the same immersive experience, taking them on a fast-paced puzzle-solving adventure into a host of different realities. The best escape games give players a trail of clues to solve, and I wanted the puzzles and mysteries that Ami finds inside The Escape to give the reader clues about the story too, about who Ami really is and exactly why she's playing the game.

What inspired the different rooms in The Escape?

As Ami realizes in the final chapter of the story, the rooms in The Escape are inspired by some of the problems we face in the world today, but also by the ideas that lie at the heart of the story. This starts with the very first room that they enter—an attic room filled with abandoned computers and a chess-playing automaton.

THE CHESS ROOM

For hundreds of years, the game of chess was viewed as a true test of intelligence. As Ami explains in the story, it's a game of logic, strategy, and skill, where the player must think ahead to make the right move. So when in the late eighteenth century, the Hungarian inventor, Wolfgang von Kempelen, unveiled a chess-playing automaton that he claimed could beat any human player, people were amazed. Also known as the Mechanical Turk, the Chess Player of Maelzel toured Europe and the United States, defeating countless opponents across the chessboard, including the French emperor Napoléon Bonaparte. However, this chess-playing machine was a fake, operated by a human player who was hidden inside. Fast-forward two hundred years and the first *real* chess computers were invented and, in 1997, the IBM supercomputer Deep Blue defeated the chess grandmaster Gary Kasparov in less than twenty moves. This historic game, where the very best human chess player was defeated by a machine, shares its moves with the game that Ami plays against the Chess Player of Maelzel in the story, although I imagined a different end-game.

THE ENDLESS LIBRARY

Watching TV news reports about devastating wildfires gave me the idea for the choking dust that Ami and the others encounter in the library, but this room also links to ideas of

information overload. Nowadays it seems like the entirety of human thought and knowledge can be found on the internet, although sometimes it can feel as if we're drowning in this information too, unable to separate truth from lies and focus on what's really important. In 1959, the American scientist Richard Feynman gave a talk about the potential of nanotechnology, where he mused that a cube the size of a mote of dust could hold the contents of all the libraries in the world. This helped to inspire the Universal Library that Ami and her friends explore in the story, a library of dust where Min falls victim to the information overload.

There are other inspirations hidden inside the library too. The "puzzle poem" that Ami finds on the shelves there presents the opening lines of the poem "There is another sky" by Emily Dickinson, which imagines another, more perfect world that we can escape to, while the information point that aids Ami's escape was inspired by the Tree of Ténéré, a solitary tree that for decades stood alone in the middle of a vast desert in West Africa. The only tree to be found for hundreds of miles around, the Tree of Ténéré was destroyed by a drunk driver who crashed into it and snapped its trunk. Now a metal sculpture of a tree marks the place where the Tree of Ténéré once stood, and in the story I imagined how this tree could be brought back to life.

THE MAYA TOMB

The tomb of the Red Queen of Palenque was discovered by an archaeologist in 1994, hidden in the depths of a Maya temple in the jungles of Mexico. The details in the story, from the bones littering the ground to the toxic dust that covered the Red Queen and her treasures, are all based on what was found in this real-life location—even the seashell with the carving inside, although I changed this from a human figure to the shape of a butterfly.

I wanted to include a Maya tomb in *The Escape*, as nobody really knows what ended the Maya civilization. Some believe that the Maya may have exhausted the environment around their cities, leading to ecological disaster. Although some claim Hunab Ku as a Maya god, it appears likely that this figure emerged post-European Conquest, as a mixing of the Maya religion with the Christian monotheistic God, and was then popularized by New Age religion in the late twentieth century. In the story, the symbol of the Hunab Ku reflects Ami's struggle to identify what's true and what to believe as she searches for the Answer.

The butterflies that swarm from the gate Ami unlocks were inspired by the butterfly effect. This is an idea from a branch of mathematics called chaos theory, which explains how small actions and events can result in big consequences. The theory gets its name from the idea that a butterfly flapping its wings in one place could be the cause of a hurricane on the other side of the world.

THE ABANDONED MALL

The extinct animals that stalk the abandoned mall are a reminder of how our own society sometimes seems to prioritize buying things over preserving the natural world, while the ladder that the Neanderthal “paints” to enable Ami and Oscar to escape from the saber-toothed tiger is based on a real cave painting that was found in Spain, which was made by Neanderthal artists more than sixty thousand years ago.

THE ESCAPE TO MARS

Real-life plans to colonize the red planet inspired the spaceship that Ami and Oscar find themselves trapped on, although this interplanetary escape also reflects my belief that we need to focus on fixing problems here on Earth before attempting to colonize other worlds. The artificial intelligence company DeepMind has created neural networks that have taught themselves how to play video games, including *Asteroids*, while AI systems are now being used by NASA to spot asteroids that could collide with Earth!

THE DESERT ISLAND

Sadly, the desert island that Ami finds herself on at the end of *The Escape* is based on a real-life place: Henderson Island. An expedition to this tiny uninhabited island, located halfway between New Zealand and Chile in the middle of the South Pacific, discovered 38 million items of trash spread across its beaches, weighing more than 18 tons. They found

that 99.8 percent of this trash was made out of plastic. This global problem of plastic pollution threatens wildlife around the world.

What research did you do when you were writing the book?

One of the themes of the book is the idea of consciousness. As humans we know we're conscious beings, but scientists and philosophers have struggled for centuries to explain exactly what consciousness is and where it comes from. This has even become known as the hard problem of consciousness, so it was quite mind-stretching at times to research these ideas! I also read lots of books about artificial intelligence before I started to write Ami's story.

So could Ami really exist?

One of the things that fascinated me as I researched the story was how far artificial intelligence has come in the last fifty years and how fast it is moving. From playing chess to driving cars, computers are already mastering the skills that humans have long pointed to as proofs of our intelligence, and AI is learning all the time. Scientists are starting to use artificial intelligence to help them tackle real-world problems like climate change, while AI developers are now building algorithms that can recognize human emotions and machines that can feel pain. Many of the people working in this field believe it is only a matter of time before AI achieves human-like intelligence and maybe even becomes self-aware, like Ami.

So it could be that AMI is already starting to take shape on a hard drive somewhere and is just waiting for the spark of consciousness. . . .

What message would you like readers to take away from the book?

That they can change the world. Sometimes the problems we face can seem overwhelming, but I'm constantly inspired by the young readers I meet and I know that they possess the imagination and creativity we need to build a brighter future and a better world. As Ami discovers, the Answer lies within, and we all have within us the potential to make a difference.