

“Boys communicate about emotions differently”

A CONVERSATION WITH KNUT NÆSHEIM*
ON *MY BEST FRIEND MARLON*

What is the aim of the series?

Næsheim: NRK had asked for a series that gave tools to boys around 8 to 10 years of age to communicate better. So I started researching on the challenges for boys in communication and found they would not talk about emotions as verbally as girls of the same age statistically do. But that doesn't mean that they don't communicate. They communicate a lot, but in different ways. And I wanted to respect that.

At the same time, it is not about boys; it is about 8-year-olds. Developmental psychology shows that one of the biggest challenges at this age is related to peer relations and the forming of social hierarchies. At this age they compare and compete and try to solve their own conflicts without grown-ups meddling. They want to rank in terms of several different parameters: who is the tallest, who is the best at drawing, who is best at anything? We don't like it because they end up getting hurt when they compare and compete, but it will happen and it is a part of their development.



Ill. 1: Marlon and Hugo are best friends

The aim was to offer stories on how to deal with these challenges – how to compare, compete and develop without hurting each other. I wanted to make a series which shows that these things happen and which acknowledges that it is okay that these things happen. But at the same time I wanted to zoom in on the situations and try to make the children more aware of what happens to everybody emotionally when these things happen.

How did you manage to achieve this in *My best friend Marlon*?

Næsheim: First I spent quite some time working on the setup. I knew that I wanted a story about positioning, about the power struggle for positions within a group of 8-year-olds: social hierarchies, making friendships, working in groups. The next step was to make a setup that worked well as a dramatic engine and at the same time gave me options to tell stories that touch these subjects that I

My best friend Marlon

“If you had to fly to the moon and could only take one person, who would you choose?”

Marlon and Hugo have been best friends since kindergarten. But then, a new kid shows up in class, Sander, who seems to be good at almost everything. While Marlon's interest is piqued Hugo responds with jealousy. Their friendship's dynamic is challenged by this, and Marlon has to try and find a balance between the 3 of them. The series follows the boys on their day-to-day adventures, like going to swimming class or taking up taekwondo, while their relationship to each other undergoes a transformation that will shape their young and increasingly more complex lives. On the way they learn what it actually means to be friends – even if some of them don't get along all the time.



©NRK

Ill. 2: Marlon (middle) has to try and strike a balance between satisfying his own needs and living up to his friends Hugo's (right) and Sander's (left) expectations

Næsheim: I didn't want to force boys to feel humiliated, and Hugo and Sander are humiliated a lot. They end up in emasculating situations where they are presented as stupid. The way the series is written forces the viewer to see it through Marlon's eyes. He is a normal kid and easy

wanted to talk about. I had to develop some kind of "value" that would be at stake in this drama. The value I ended up with was an old friendship that is at stake in every episode because the new kid arrives. There is an eternal conflict in the main character Marlon who wants both, to keep his old friendship and develop. In the story, the new kid represents his opportunity to develop. But it seems as if he cannot have both, because his old friend Hugo does not let him develop – and the development in a way does not let him take his old friend along.

How do the boys communicate about emotions without talking about them?

Næsheim: They all want to handle their emotions, but they don't have the language for it. And yet there are so many non-verbal ways to express these things which they kind of explore. In one episode, for example, Hugo gives Marlon a piece of orange and that means: "I am sorry." In the writing and directing I tried to spend enough time on zooming into these situations. When something happens, I give it a lot of time so that the viewer can watch and can take time to digest what happened to the relationships afterwards. This at least has been my goal.

Normally Hugo, the loser, would have been the main character. Why didn't you choose him?

Næsheim: This choice is based a lot on the research I did. Two years ago, for

example, I encountered the IZI research that boys tend to find it hard to identify with hopeless situations in which the characters don't have the strength to fix it, and that boys – like girls – hate humiliating situations or emasculating situations and find it hard to identify with the victim. As a writer, I know that it is very easy to make the main character a victim, because then you have a lot of challenges and obstacles. I guess this is why we have an overload of main characters that are victims, that are either being bullied or somehow alone in the wrong place. The story then tends to be that he or she finds a friend through the story. These can be beautiful and important stories, I don't want to talk these stories down, but compared to the situation of real kids you will find that most kids actually have friends and are quite good at what they do. Most kids are positive and want positive relationships; and most kids are not extremely popular but quite popular. There are, of course, some outcasts, and their stories are important – but it seems to me like there are so many stories left untold, stories that are more relevant to normal kids to deal with their everyday situation, stories on how to deal with the responsibilities when building their own social hierarchies.

Consider some boys in front of a TV set: in whose footsteps should they follow, who should they identify with?

to identify with. In the story, Marlon is a kind of "safe place to put your heart and mind" to experience what happens to the others and learn from it without being forced to feel like that happens to you. So Marlon is constructed as a main character to shelter the 8-year-old boys watching the series from the most humiliating emotions, so that they can see it through some sort of filter.

The series is being aired at the moment. Is it well received by the audience?

Næsheim: The numbers are good. They are not top-rated, but they are quite high. It was never my goal to make the next *Harry Potter*. But, of course, when you make something it is important that it is seen. The numbers mean something and I am really glad that they are high. This age group is used to really colourful action adventures. There are usually some kind of supernatural powers in all the things that these boys watch – or at least some really ambitious athletes. And here we have just a live-action setup with 3 real boys that have no special powers. But apparently, when somebody starts to watch the series they continue to watch it. ■

* Knut Næsheim is director and script-writer at NRK, Norway.