

BEHIND THE BOOK - THE TALK-FUNNY GIRL

I'm a city kid by birth and upbringing, from a section of Revere, Massachusetts, that used to be called 'The Highlands.'

(Real estate agents now include my neighborhood under a new label - 'West Revere', apparently to distinguish it from East Revere, where there are more immigrants and where the houses are often triple-deckers on small lots. This is a completely arbitrary designation. There was no West Revere in my day. There was little or no sense that one part of the city was radically different, socio-economically, from any other. One end of the beach might have been known for slightly nicer homes, the other end for slightly poorer families, but the differences were small. Revere was Revere, five square miles of generosity and grit, an excellent place for a writer's imagination to form.)

From my house, if you walked west a few blocks to the top of the Mountain Avenue hill, you could see the Boston skyline, such as it was then. If you walked east a mile or so, you could get on the subway and be in downtown Boston in fifteen minutes. Another hundred yards and you could jump in the Atlantic.

These days I'm often back in Revere for a swim at the beach and a visit with relatives, and I love to go to Manhattan for a day-trip, love the different faces and languages there, the architecture, the vibrancy of city life. It's amazing to me that so many millions of people can live on that island and crowd the mid-town sidewalks in such relative peace. And it seems to me that, despite its reputation for abrasive types, the natives are more gregarious there than they are in the country, where people like their space and their quiet.

I've lived in rural New England for thirty-five years now, so I've obviously found it a good place to settle, to raise kids, to write books. But, from an artistic standpoint, it's never been particularly inspiring to me. Books I've published while living here in these wooded hills include ones set in Micronesia and Russia, Italy, Boston, Cuba, and, of course, Revere. It often seemed strange to me - and more so to neighbors and readers - that I never wrote anything set in the kind of place where I've spent more than half my life.

And then one day I sat down at the desk and started a new novel, as usual, without having any idea where it was going, without an outline or a cast of characters. All I had was a young woman walking down a country road being beset by black flies - an affliction you have to have experienced in order to fully appreciate. After I'd written a few lines it occurred to me that she must be a teenager on her way to look for a job. And then I thought maybe it was her birthday. And then her seventeenth birthday. And then I had to figure out why she was on that road, why she was looking for work on that day instead of celebrating with family. Little by little, idea by idea, draft by draft, the full story fell into place.

My sense is that these stories-for me and many other writers - come from the subconscious. The trick is to find a route down into them, in something like the way drillers for water or oil sink a pipe into the earth and hope something good comes bubbling up.

I've always had a particular interest in people who've been abused, or who've suffered some other kind of trauma, or who've endured an illness and fought their way back and made a normal, sane, good life out of the wreckage and pain. You can see that theme in so many of my novels. The

trauma might be combat as in *Leaving Losapas*, or divorce in *A Russian Requiem*, or chronic illness in *A Little Love Story*, or abuse and addiction in *Revere Beach Boulevard* and *The Return* or the early loss of loved ones in *In Revere in those Days* and *Lunch with Buddha*.

Some of that fascination came from the years when I taught, especially the seven years at Bennington College. There were a lot of individual tutorials at Bennington, a lot of academic counseling sessions, and, through those meetings and through my students' writing I often came to know a great deal about their personal situations. Many of them had been through various kinds of challenges and trauma, and had clearly rebuilt themselves, psychologically and emotionally, or were in the process of doing so. I had such admiration for them. I could read the pain on their faces and hear it in their voices and see it clearly in their stories. They hadn't given up. They hadn't taken refuge in hurting others. Almost always there had been someone in their life - grandmother, aunt, older sibling, best friend, teacher, coach - who'd saved them from a very different kind of future.

Beyond that, having lived in the country all these years, I've had occasion to come face to face with the national shame of rural poverty. This is a poverty that will never be shown on the TV screens, and rarely written about in print. You won't accidentally make a wrong turn on your way home from a Bruins game and find yourself near one of these houses. But there is a place not far from here that I often pass, a wreck of a house with garbage strewn about, plastic on the windows and rusting vehicles in the yard, and I'll sometimes see one of the teenage kids out front waiting for the school bus, no backpack or nice clothes or warm hat in winter.

All of that went into *The Talk-Funny Girl*. When I was about three-quarters of the way through the manuscript I remembered a terrible incident I'd witnessed long before I had children. We were living in Pownal, Vermont, then, and I was involved in a big carpentry job in Stamford, Vermont, a half hour or so away. Some nights on the way home, weary, hungry, maybe frustrated by a thorny carpentry problem, I'd stop in a convenience store on Route 7 and buy a quart of Haagen Dazs Vanilla Swiss Almond and eat the whole thing in my pickup truck before going home to dinner. On one of those evenings I saw a young woman in the store. She was probably twenty and she had a little boy with her, probably three. While she was talking to the store owner the little boy ran down the aisle, as little boys do, and knocked over a few cereal boxes.

The mother grabbed him and shook him and said, in a loud voice, something so racist, so illogical, so hurtful, that I can't repeat it here. If I'd had children of my own then, or been a little braver, I might have stepped in and told her to take it easy, cut the little guy some slack, but that's a hard line to cross with a parent. Still, the things she said - clearly without worrying that I or the owner of the store might hear - found a permanent place in my memory. And somewhere on about page 230 of the first draft I remembered the incident - which had happened some twenty years before I started writing the novel. If you look on page 227 you can find, verbatim, what that mother said to that boy in Pownal.

The Talk-Funny Girl is my darkest book, a tale of child abuse and lunacy set in the backwoods of west-central New Hampshire. But what I'm fascinated by is not the abuse itself, but the way some abused people find the courage to move forward, to heal, to keep from passing on their pain to the next generation. It's ultimately an affirming story, born of compassion, but I don't think I'll write anything like it ever again.