



Author Asks

from Jerry Gabriel,
*author of **Drowned Boy***

13-digit ISBN (paper): 978-1-932511-78-9

- 1** I titled this collection *Drowned Boy*, after the character Stevie Lowe, who does not ever appear alive in the stories at all. Something I'd like readers to consider is why the book is titled after the absence of a character. What other kinds of important absences are there in the book? What kinds of action or feeling do they inspire? What other "drowned boys" are there?
- 2** The name of the small Ohio town in which many of these stories take place is "Moraine," which is also the term used for the deposit left after a glacier recedes. I'm interested in what readers see as the connection between the remnants of history and the current state of things. How do you think that history—of particular characters and of the place itself— influences the present in this book?
- 3** In "Atlas," Nate says of his father, "For all of the will of his heart, he and I were finally two different species." Is miscomprehension a common problem between characters in this collection? If so, what is its basis?
- 4** In many of these stories, I focused on how boys grow up in southern Ohio. I'm interested in what readers think of the codes of masculinity that Nate and his friends learn along the way. What are the important elements of being a man? What are the actions and feelings that are discouraged by this culture? What role, in particular, does sports play in helping Nate and his friends to negotiate the world? How does it hinder them?
- 5** Because the same characters recur in many of these stories, I consider this to be a story cycle or collection of linked stories. What, besides these recurring characters and setting, do you see as linking the stories? Which ideas run across two or more stories? What is the arc or shape of the stories taken as a whole? How do the characters or ideas change from beginning to end?
- 6** I focused many of these stories on moments where the characters discover some knowledge previously hidden from them; this knowledge often troubles not just how they think about life but how they live it. What kinds of things do they learn? What kinds of conventions or social systems are challenged by that knowledge?
- 7** Sherwood Anderson published "Winesburg, Ohio," a collection of linked stories about small-town Ohio, almost a hundred years ago. What do you see as the similarities between his collection and mine? And what do you see as the differences?

continued on back

- 8** Parents and parental influence were an important, if shadowy, presence during my writing of this collection. I'm interested in how readers think of the role of Nate's father (featured most prominently in "Falling Water" and "Atlas," and whose death is mentioned in "Drowned Boy") and his mother (featured in "Boys Industrial School"). What kinds of influence do parents have on children in these stories, in your opinion? What kinds of things escape them? Are they more important as a presence or an absence to shaping the action or thoughts of the main characters?
- 9** In this collection, Nate moves through the southern Ohio landscape at various speeds and with varied amounts of attention: in "Boys Industrial School," for example, Donnie and Nate walk through the woods bordering their house, but in "Drowned Boy," Nate and Samantha travel by car through several counties. What kinds of observations does Nate (and Samantha) make of the landscape and how do you see it influencing their thoughts and actions?
- 10** A related question I'd like readers to consider is about the world outside Moraine and its environs. When Nate listens to the radio station in "Boys Industrial School" or travels to his brother's house in Kansas in "Reagan's Army in Retreat," completely different kinds of landscapes and cultures are hinted at. Do the characters in these stories seem to long to escape their small town rural life or are they, in your view, afraid of such an escape?
- 11** I wrote a number of these stories from points of view other than Nate's—in "Slump," for example, the story is told from the point of view of a high school shop teacher named Mr. Kern and in "Marauders," the story is told from a collective first-person point of view ("We"). For you as a reader, what kind of feeling do those shifts add to the collection as a whole? How would you describe this community of observers?
- 12** I was also very concerned with marking the way that time moves in these stories. Many of them focus on a few days, like "Boys Industrial School," but some of them only on the incidents of a few hours, like "Atlas." I'd like to ask readers to consider how the compression of time affected their reading in the stories, but also how this collection works as a timeline of Nate's formative years. Which events stand out most in your mind as being most important to Nate? Are they the ones he narrates or the ones he mentions briefly? Are they the things that happened most recently to him or those in the distant past?

DROWNED BOY IS PUBLISHED BY SARABANDE BOOKS.
FOUNDED IN 1994 TO PUBLISH POETRY, SHORT FICTION, AND
LITERARY NONFICTION, SARABANDE IS A NONPROFIT LITERARY PRESS
HEADQUARTERED IN LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY. IT IS OUR MISSION TO
DISBURSE THESE WORKS WITH DILIGENCE AND INTEGRITY, AND TO SERVE AS
AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE TO TEACHERS AND STUDENTS OF CREATIVE WRITING.



The Kentucky Arts Council, the state arts agency, supports Sarabande Books with state tax dollars and federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art.



Writing Exercises

from Jerry Gabriel,
author of Drowned Boy

13-digit ISBN (paper): 978-1-932511-78-9

The Real World Interrupts

Something I'm always trying to get my students to pay attention to is the real world. What I mean is, while writing is an act of the imagination, the actions of your characters are bound to some parameter or another, and, typically, these parameters have something to do with how we—people—actually act. For instance, if you want to get your character across town to check to see if her husband is cheating on her (I tell my students), think about how she would actually do it. You needn't invent a mechanism to her there, because multiple ways already exist. She could take a bus or a train. She could call a friend to take her. She could walk. Or steal a bike. The point is that sometimes when we write, we get caught up in the significance of the plot turn (is the husband cheating?) and forget that stories are basically about normal people doing (relatively) normal things—and that the act of getting there—the manner she chooses and how it goes—can reveal as much about her and the story as the realization that her husband is cheating (or not). We have no idea who she might meet on the way there. Or what kind of dialogue will emerge when, say, her friend picks her up.

The exercise: Choose a stock situation—the kind of thing that would be given in the *Spark Notes* of your story (woman thinks her husband is cheating; man returns to hometown for 20th high school reunion; drunken couple argues about whose to blame for their troubles in a bar; gardener sees thief escape down the trellis of the house). Next, write a scene in which that drama is forestalled by the real world interrupting it. The woman in the drunken couple has to go to the bathroom (many things can happen between the table and the bathroom). The gardener has to pick up his daughter at soccer practice. Use that digression to explore the character.

Confusion

Stories of course are all about conflict. A great device for explicit conflict is dialogue. Something I've been asking my classes to do lately is write a scene in which two characters are not understanding one another, even though they may be trying to. As you write, hold on to the confusion for as long as possible; look for ways of further complicating the misunderstanding. The idea is that our experience of the world is incredibly subjective; sometimes bridging the gap from our own perspective to the experiences of others is difficult, maybe even impossible on occasion. It's a fundamental problem, a real problem.

It's also a great way to create space in a story for tension.

For writing exercises from other Sarabande authors, visit our website at www.sarabandebooks.org.

Suggested Reading

The Dog of the South, Charles Portis
Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison
The Collected Stories, Isaac Babel
The Castle, Franz Kafka
The Collected Stories, Flannery O'Connor
The Voyage of the Narwhal, Andrea Barrett
Black Swan Green, David Mitchell
No One Writes to the Colonel, Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Vertigo, W. G. Sebald
Nobody's Fool, Richard Russo
Winesburg, Ohio, Sherwood Anderson
Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha, Roddy Doyle
The Passion, Jeannette Winterson
Sabbath's Theater, Phillip Roth
Friend of My Youth, Alice Munro

DROWNED BOY IS PUBLISHED BY SARABANDE BOOKS.
FOUNDED IN 1994 TO PUBLISH POETRY, SHORT FICTION, AND
LITERARY NONFICTION, SARABANDE IS A NONPROFIT LITERARY PRESS
HEADQUARTERED IN LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY. IT IS OUR MISSION TO
DISBURSE THESE WORKS WITH DILIGENCE AND INTEGRITY, AND TO SERVE AS
AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE TO TEACHERS AND STUDENTS OF CREATIVE WRITING.



The Kentucky Arts Council, the state arts agency, supports Sarabande Books with state tax dollars and federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art.