



David Amsden

Important Things That Don't Matter
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Your novel is so raw and insightful. How much of your own life is infused in this story?

You'd think I would have a proper answer to this question by now, sitting here at my desk two years after writing the last sentence of the book. And yet ... I don't. Instead I become nervous. Very, very nervous.

But that's a cheap response, so here goes: This book would have been impossible to write had I not lived the life I've lived — namely, it takes place where I grew up and deals with the sort of people I've known the longest. All the same, I feel like to document the precise ways in which the vectors of my life and those of the book intersect is beside the point. To me, the imagination is a kind of internal lens that we all use (in various ways) to process reality. And fiction is a kind of invention of the imagination: turning this nebulous force into something with words and pages and characters that roam around with the possibility of sneaking into other people's imaginations and acting in unpredictable ways. When I wrote it, I didn't care at all about my past or (and I hope this doesn't sound cold) the emotions of any "real people" in my life. (For the record, my friends and family still talk to me). As a fiction writer, fretting over these matters can be paralyzing. Worrying about accuracy and what people might think ends up being an anesthetic to everything wonderful about the process of writing and publishing a novel. Most importantly, the book is based on emotional truths — as opposed to real life "facts" — which are what I find so compelling. It's unabashedly rooted in my real life sympathies and emotional alliances, the exact origins of which I prefer to keep to myself.

In the bathroom with T.J., you leave it off at T.J. asking the boy to touch him. Its abrupt ending leaves so much unanswered, and so much is left to the imagination. Did he do it, did he walk away? At the same time, it is very like the character to just ignore it, stop it, make it go away, just by not describing the scene in any more detail. What did you want the reader to walk away with here?

As much as this book chronicles fifteen years of a life, it also chronicles memories of a life: how the past chews at the corners of the present, diluting certain truths while magnifying others. The narrator is only twenty, so the memories aren't even fully formed — they haven't had time to marinate, to be analyzed and neatly sorted, as happens with adults (and especially adults who have the sort of education that this boy hasn't had). My goal with a lot of the book's scenes was to get at this craggy terrain: how some elements of the past puncture the present in a way that makes the boy so uncomfortable that he'd rather move on, think about something, anything else. It's like he thinks he's dying to confess something, but once he gets going something in his mind goes sort of haywire; the concept of total confession is much more powerful for him than the actual act. In this particular scene with T.J., I wanted to show that this moment (and the way it sits in his head) has had an effect on him that even he hasn't worked out yet — which I think is how these matters often are in reality. It's like he doesn't even trust himself to process this completely. The reader, then, is asking the same questions he's asking: Namely, what the hell happened? Do I really want to know? I mean, aren't those the questions that everyone is always asking?

So many of your reviewers are jealous of your talent, especially for someone so young. How old were you when you started writing this novel? Have you had other works published before this?

Is it possible to answer this one without sounding like an ass? I was twenty-one when I wrote the book. It was my first published fiction (I've since published a couple short stories). I'd been writing fiction fanatically since I was seventeen, looking for a voice that felt true and honest and worth exploring for an entire book, and this one just tore through me. I'd published a lot of non-fiction, magazine stuff that was fun to do but always left me feeling a little gutted out and hungry to do something that pushed a little harder. That said, while I did see some reviews that seemed fueled by misguided venom, I have to say that most seemed pretty fair and thoughtful. Even the ones I disagreed with. Had the responses to the book been uniform and exactly what I'd hoped for then I'd probably have done something wrong as a writer.

There's a bar scene with Joe and the protagonist at a very young age. The boy is chugging Cokes, the father is downing martinis. Suddenly the father falls onto the floor, laughing. Then he goes silent. It almost seems as if Joe is having a heart attack or a stroke, but you really don't get into what the boy is thinking, other than he was frightened. Were you illustrating the father's typical irresponsible parenting, or something more?

Well, that section does represent a kind of typical Saturday afternoon with the dad: some kids are playing catch in the backyard; others are playing drinking games in a seedy bar. The reason you don't know what the boy is thinking is simple: he's seven years old, and soaking it up in that mysterious way kids have, where they're not nearly so eager to judge and make sense of things as adults are. At the same time, there is something at work in this scene that sets up one of the main themes of the book: The dad is on the floor; the kid is above him. The kid is, basically, much more like the parent here, which is a dynamic I'm infinitely fascinated with. I think much of the book deals with what it's like to be forced into a jittery state of premature adulthood, and the ending at the bar sort of slams that into the reader's head without having to sound like someone who took too many psychology courses (e.g. the way I sound right now).

The protagonist does a great job in repressing his feelings. He's actually pretty resilient. His pent up emotions only backfire on him a couple of times, when he lashes out at Melanie, when his father calls him on it, and when he tries to bankrupt his father at the most expensive restaurant he can find. Say we were to visit the protagonist ten years from now. Where would we find him, and in what shape would we find him in?

I truly don't know. That's the exact question I want whirling through people's minds when they finish the book.

Why was the protagonist anonymous throughout the story?

There's two parts to this answer. One, when I was writing, there wasn't a name that flashed in my mind. I scribbled possibilities down on notepads, looked them over, and felt like such a cliché that all I could do was laugh at myself. So I wrote the book, finished it, and noticed the guy had no name. I suppose that somewhere along the lines my subconscious latched on to this and thought it was a good idea, and quietly vetoed any attempts I consciously made to name him throughout. I've always liked fictional characters that are at once etched out and also kind of vague enough that you cannot only relate to them, but crawl right up under their skin while reading. It gives the book a sense of emotional urgency. Keeping him nameless, I guess, makes all that a little easier.