



Don Silver

Backward-Facing Man
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Q: The abduction of Patty Hearst serves as a frame story for your novel, *Backward-Facing Man*. Why did you decide to ground your fictional novel in such a well-known real-life event?

A: The Hearst abduction was the first protracted live televised media disaster, where reporters camped out in front of someone's house whose loved one was in mortal danger, waiting for them to sigh, or tear up, or break down. Nowadays, media are dispatched to cover sad stories and bizarre events that result in unspeakable sadness for families every week. There seems to be no limit to our curiosity or boundaries for our journalists. The Hearst saga makes us consider the degree we take responsibility for our actions, which has fascinated me since I accidentally knocked a glass of milk off the kitchen table and made the mistake of telling my father "it fell." Today, you drive down the highway and there are billboards that say, "Injured? Call us!" In 1975, the nation and 12 jurors seemed to hold Patty Hearst responsible for crimes she committed after being kidnapped and tortured. Twenty years later, a woman who spilled a steaming hot cup of coffee in her lap, sued McDonald's won \$2.9MM. In a novel that explores changes that have occurred in our society over this period, the Patty Hearst story is enduring. Lastly, I couldn't resist the irony of a real-life terrorist group using the

granddaughter of William Randolph Hearst, the media mogul who pretty much invented sensationalist journalism, to get tens of millions of dollars of free advertising.

Q: *Backward-Facing Man* charts the experiences of three characters who first meet at MIT in 1968. Why did you choose this milieu for your novel?

A: When you look at the '60s, 1968 was a pivot year. Before that, people felt optimistic; after that, there was a lot more grittiness, fear, and violence. The point where things spiral out of control for my characters is exactly the point where things spun out of control in the 1960s. Boston was a young town in a liberal state. I wanted a place where these people would be less an exception and more the norm.

Q: The 1960s occupy a rarefied place in American history. Why does that particular era continue to intrigue our society?

A: Part of it is nostalgia: A lot of culturally significant and personally important things happened and a very good time was had by a huge number of people who have since gotten older, wealthier and have a lot more time on their hands. So in some ways, Sixties nostalgia is the intellectual correlative to listening to a good oldies station. In addition, an argument can be made that the Christian right and neoconservative movements owe their existence to the excesses of the '60s. As Karen Armstrong has noted, the U.S. has always been prone to extremism and apocalyptic enthusiasm. Many of our country's political and business leaders made their careers in the aftermath of the 1960s by responding to the missteps of radicals: the shrill rhetoric, the militant protests, the bombings, the flagrant moral excesses, and the tremendous fear that groups like the Black Panthers and the SLA inspired. At the same time, civil rights improved for blacks and women and for a while there anyway, it seemed like stewardship for Planet Earth and our environment trumped or at least pulled even with corporate interests.

Q: What kind of historical research did you do in writing this book?

A: I interviewed retired FBI agents and read a lot about the '60s, particularly from and about radical political groups, memoirs, and historical accounts. Even though the SLA (Symbionese Liberation Army) and the kidnapping of Patty Hearst was in the news for almost two years as big as or bigger than the OJ Simpson trial, I read numerous accounts so I could render it faithfully. I also read all about William Randolph Hearst and the beginnings of media and spent some time at the Museum of Radio and Television in New York watching *Gilligan's Island* episodes I'd somehow missed.

Q: Did your experience as president of a manufacturing company play any part in your inclusion of a manufacturing company *Backward-Facing Man*?

A: People in business walk a fine line. A corporation is a legal entity, which, most of the time, shields the people managing it from being responsible for what they do. A culture develops in a place of work that is different from each individual's personality and values. In that way, there's a little Stockholm Syndrome taking place in everybody who gets involved. If you've ever been in a factory, you realize that in manufacturing companies, it's a little harder to ignore the consequences of what you do and to cover your tracks. We're still talking about taking responsibility. I also wanted to write about what happens when family members work together. Tolstoy might have said, "every family business is unhappy in its own way."

Q: Lorraine Nadia is a quasi-mystical character in *Backward-Facing Man*, with frank sexual appetites of her own, a radical political sensibility, and utter devotion to her daughter, Stardust. How is she representative of the feminist forces at work in the late 1960s and early 1970s?

A: The radical left and the '60s counter-culture was decidedly un-feminist when it began. After the Democratic National Convention in the summer of 1968, women began to be critical of the movement and their personal relationships and to demand more respect and authority. Because of her pregnancy and the circumstances surrounding Frederick's and her transgressions, Lorraine had to take another path. It was still difficult, but she did so, in my opinion, with grace, determination and aplomb.

Q: When your novel opens, we meet Stardust Nadia: Did you conceive of *Backward-Facing Man* as a record of the consequences, alliances, and encounters that led to her life?

A: Stardust was the first character I had, long before I had a plot or any idea about themes. I started writing in her voice, considering what it would be like, having her lineage being heir to an era that created Frederick, Lorraine & Chuck stuck in modern times, answering phones in a personal injury law firm.

Q: *Backward-Facing Man* includes a number of mysterious disappearances. Is there something about this phenomenon that attracts you as a writer?

"In a field/I am the absence/of field," says poet Mark Strand. It's much easier for me to notice things when they disappear.

Q: Can you discuss your process as a first-time novelist? How did this book come about?

A: At age 40, after spending about twenty years in various businesses, I got my Masters in Fine Arts from Bennington College and quit corporate life to consult, teach and write. In 2000, I had the idea for **Backward-Facing Man**, which started as a prose poem that grew into a short story that became a novella: In 2002, I decided to bail from business and focused full-time on the writing. Last fall, I completed the manuscript and found an agent, who forwarded the manuscript to Dan Halpern at Ecco.

Q: What is your next project?

A: I'm trying to figure out what happens when a doctor, a dominatrix, and a psychologist become entangled.