



Bryan Charles

Grab On to Me Tightly as if I Knew the Way
ISBN13: 9780060882983

Q: In the acknowledgements of *Grab On to Me Tightly, As If I Knew the Way*, you say that your years in Kalamazoo, Michigan, helped define you. How much of your own life is reflected in *Vim's*?

A: Well I can't lie—not that anyone would believe me anyway—but quite a bit of my life is reflected in *Vim's*—my parents divorced when I was quite young, I was obsessed with tits and music, I played in a band, at some point in my late teens, my biological father, whom I'd never been close to, did decide that that was the perfect time to really start bonding and he started making those bland kind of overtures, saying "now we can be a family." Oh, and he did send a note my first summer out of high school, though in reality much shorter and to the point, saying he'd heard I quit my job and that was very irresponsible of me and I was wasting my time, etc. So the book is certainly autobiographical in the broad sense. At the same time, many of the particulars are invented, perhaps most notably the character of Helene. I mean, I did meet a girl who resembled her physically, under

similar circumstances—she had scars on her arms, she was reading *Naked Lunch*, it was hot—but the rest is made up, her personality, those situations, the band ending in that way. It was more like I was going from feeling there, thinking of all the borderline-obsessive crushes I've had over the years, the hot urgent longing for just that one kiss, if I could just get that one kiss, you know, then I could die happy. And I'm not talking about just my teen years here, this is well into my adulthood, until pretty much now. And that's the thing that may surprise people in terms of the book being autobiographical—surprise people or embarrass me, I can't tell which—but my mindset is still very much like *Vim's*, that kind of extreme highs and lows, happy and sad acting out kind of thing. When I was writing the book, I was all over the map emotionally. I was dealing with some things and I'd just quit a well-paying job with a lot of comfortable adult perks like health insurance and all that, but my heart wasn't in it—was twenty million miles from it, actually—and I had to take the leap. My mom flew out to New York to try and talk me out of it. "Well, hold on here, don't do anything rash." But I did, and as I was writing, I thought a lot about freedom in the existential sense and I sat in my room asking myself all kinds of questions like "Why am I here?" all this stuff we tend to associate with a kind of teenage solipsism, or like an undergrad on weed. But I was 27, 28, and I put it all in there. So there are definite parallels between *Vim's* and my early life, but the book is also closer to the way I think and feel now than one might expect. It's probably truer than most memoirs coming out these days.

Q: At one point, Jake says, "there are only so many ways to tell the same story." Did you ever fear that your premise was clichéd? Why did you end the book with the question of any relationship between *Vim* and Helene unanswered?

A: Oh, I absolutely felt my premise was clichéd, and that's exactly why I included that exchange in the book. That was the main overarching anxiety that hounded me all through the writing and long afterward, even after it was sold. You know, coming-of-age gets kind of a bad rap, at least in lit circles. No one wants to hear about it and you get a lot of resistance, a lot of it a passive kind of well-meaning resistance, but still. You feel like a jerk telling people what your book's about. "Oh, I've got this novel, it's about a guy's first summer out of high school, he comes to terms with things, parents are divorced, this and that." Fascinating. Can't wait. I got rejection letters from agents: "There's not enough here, I can't sell this." A teacher of mine—a good teacher, an accomplished novelist, a real pro—said to me after reading a draft of the early pages, "You know, it's nearly impossible to write about people under the voting age and have it be interesting." And this is coming from a person I respect, an authority, someone I'm intimidated by, even. So what am I supposed to do? Scrap the whole idea and write a legal thriller? Or a multigenerational family saga? Something about the Holocaust? And that's the thing you have to realize—there's only a handful of stories out there, a handful of conflicts. I could have written a family saga or thriller and peoples' eyes would have glazed over in exactly the same way. In the end, you just have to do your best with your material, and you have to believe in it and be committed to it in order for it to resonate and be real. I'm not saying it wasn't a struggle for me, a big hurdle, getting comfortable with the notion that I was working in a genre that's seen lots of miles and been done a lot better than I was ever going to do it. But even on the worst of days, the most discouraged of days, I believed deep down in what I was doing. I would've been sunk otherwise. As far as the end, with *Vim* and Helene, the simplest answer is the truest: I like a little bit of mystery. As a reader or a filmgoer, I don't necessarily need everything wrapped up in a neat little package. There may be some initial confusion or disappointment, a hunger for some resolution, speaking for myself here too, like when I read *Infinite Jest* or with the movie *Broken Flowers*. "Wait, that's it, that's the end? That's bullshit." But then you think more about it, you start asking yourself questions. Why has this been withheld? Does it work? Has the journey been worth it? And sometime's the answer's no, and that's the chance you gotta take.

Q: The title of the novel, *Grab On To Me Tightly As If I Knew The Way* is a lyric from "Angel Carver Blues" by Pavement, a seminal band in the 1990s. Did you listen to their albums while writing?

A: Pavement is my all-time favorite band, and I've been listening to their records since 1992, throughout every phase of my life since then. So yes, I did listen to their music during the time that I was writing this book, and Stephen Malkmus' solo records too. He's the best songwriter of my generation, bar none. I mean, there was Cobain, but he had just that one note, or two notes, I should say. He had the beautifully depressive thing, like "All Apologies," or the primal-scream-of-rage thing, like on "Scentless Apprentice." It's possible his range would have expanded with age, but it's one of those rock and roll parlor games. We'll never know. Malkmus, on the other hand, going back to his early records, he got all of it, the whole experience, the confusion and the pain and that kind of fuck-you resistance—his resistance was more complicated, more subtle, and I think it got misinterpreted a lot of the time as this slacker thing, which to me has always been wildly off the mark. So he had all that stuff, but the guy's also funny, he's a gifted comedian, and he just keeps getting better. He's kept growing as a songwriter and his newer records—if you sit with them for a while, spend time with the lyrics—they address real, grown-up-type issues. "Wedding bells and Christmas hell/to that life you did aspire." I mean, that's fantastic, and it's the kind of thing you're probably not going to get from a bunch of Brooklyn guys in their twenties who sound like The Cure. But about the title—for about a year, maybe over a year, I had a different working title, and it was a more flip, kind of wink-wink title. Then, as it happened, I tossed out almost all of the material I'd written until then and started almost from scratch. I think the only thing I kept was the scene where *Vim* meets Helene. And a different tone emerged, a different form, and I tried striking a greater balance between the big emotional crutches of my generation—sarcasm and movie quotes and band names—and a deeper subtext, a more melancholy kind of feeling, an awareness of the ephemerality of things. Yeah, your teen years are fleeting, but so is your whole life. I guess that sounds pretty high-flown and pretentious, but that's what I was going for. And that line from Malkmus—and maybe his whole body of work—seemed to speak to that in some way.

Q: Your musical influences come across clearly in the book, but which authors would you name as your strongest literary influences?

A: Certainly when I was writing the book, my strongest literary influence was Barry Hannah. Anyone who even glances at his book *Ray* will see where I got the idea for the book's fractured form. The polite term for this is, as you say, "influence." But when I really respond to someone's writing, I tend to read all their books one after the other and linger and go back to them and it's a total-immersion experience. So that's what I was doing with Hannah when I was writing *Grab On to Me*. Beyond that, there's a fairly broad range of writers I love. I'm interested in the Beats and in the New York School poets, Ashbery and O'Hara and those guys. Sometimes I wish I could go back and try and be a writer during that time. Maybe this is all misguided, after-the-fact romanticism, but it seems to me there was a greater freedom then, not in a larger cultural sense, but in the sense that there was a group of writers working under the radar—well, the Beats were pretty hyped and famous, but the New York School poets—who were all passionately responsive to art and writing, who lived to read and create, who were joyous about it. Now, of course, it's a whole different scene, a more pro kind of scene in a lot of ways, a lot of savvy young writers steeped in publishing-biz culture who think of writing as "product" and so forth. I'm not saying I'm above that type of thinking, because that's not at all the case. I can throw down with the best of them. Maybe what I'm saying is I wish I was a little less like that. But to get back to the issue at hand, literary influences, I guess there are too many to really name. I'm a very impressionable reader. Generally, no matter what I'm reading, if I like it well enough, I find myself thinking, "Yes, this is the way to go, I'm going to try something like this." To give a recent example of this, I'm working on something now, a new novel, and a couple of months ago I read Joan Silber's *Ideas of Heaven*, and it knocked me flat. I thought, "This is wonderful, effective writing. For my new book I'm going to try writing in this kind of wonderfully clear prose, and I'm going to pull back and take a long view and let years pass in a single paragraph and not dwell so much and get all hung up in these close, neurotic scenes." So I started trying to work in that mode, you know, trying to put my own spin on it. A couple of weeks later I read *Big Sur*, by Jack Kerouac, and I thought it was stunning. And I had an epiphany. I thought, "This is how I want my new book to be. I want this kind of fast, messy writing. I want to zoom right in close and dish all the gruesome details and just get it all out and it'll be a beast." Now, these two aesthetics are about as different as you can get, but they're warring inside me at the moment. And the hope is that it'll all shake out in the end and I'll be able to take the things I like from both these writers and process them in such a way that it's my own separate thing.

Q: You mentioned a new novel. Can you tell us a bit more about it?

A: I've probably already said too much, coping to my influences so early in the process, but I've been working on it steadily for about the last six months and so far I'm more excited by it than I ever was at any time with *Grab*. This could merely be a function of having gotten that first book out of the way, gleaned a little know-how, gotten maybe a sliver more confidence, just enough to think I could do it again. I remember after I finished *Grab* it was as if an enormous weight had been lifted, there was this deep-soul release and I thought, "I'm never writing anything again." And for over a year I didn't. I had to get back in a cubicle and refill the coffers and dull myself out. Then at some point, I got the itch. I started making notes, I got the characters down, I got a narrative arc. And then I quit my job again and went off in the woods for two months and I started it. I don't want to give too much away, but the new novel is about coming back to life after near-death catastrophe, both coming back to life and trying to hold on to that urgent, post-traumatic sense that life matters and it's something you should be grateful for. It's a story I've been thinking about writing for the last several years but I couldn't really do it until now. That's my new thing. Stay in the now.