

1. What literature styles and authors have influenced your life or style of writing?

Like a lot of writers, I began as a reader. When I was a teenager, I read indiscriminately and didn't think to consider differences in style or approach. So I might read Hemingway and then Beckett, then Turgenev, Hesse, Austen, Mishima, Hammett, Garcia-Marquez, Faulkner, and so on, never really thinking about the fact that some of these writers are termed "modern" or "experimental," while others are much more traditional. And I think that for me, this was quite a useful way to approach literature. I learned to read books for whatever they could offer me, without recourse to preordained characteristics or labels. I still read experimental literature, despite the fact that my own book is pretty traditional, and the writer I'm currently most interested in is Haruki Murakami. I also read a fair amount of poetry. I think *Homecoming* owes a debt to Whitman and Frost, but the writer to whom it owes its biggest debt is certainly E. M. Forster, for his interest in moral fiction. Forster's humanism is a quality I tried hard to channel in this book.

2. Do you see similarities in painting, novel writing, poetry, and film? What key differences? Do you try to express certain thoughts and feelings through one medium and other feelings through the other, or are they two sides of the same coin? Do you feel you are going to be focusing more on writing now or still keep up with other mediums?

The most important thing I learned from my time as a painter was a work method. As a young painter, I may have been too easily satisfied by my own paintings. It took me a while to learn to have high standards and learn to work hard—even to be willing to toss something out if it was good but not great. This is the attitude I brought to my desk when I started writing: I'm very indulgent with myself during the creative process, but when I go back and edit, I'm more harsh. I cut quite a bit of material from *Homecoming*, not because it wasn't good or interesting, but because it didn't contribute to my larger ambitions for the book. As a painter, I wasn't nearly ambitious enough, and I knew very clearly, when I started writing, that I didn't want to make that mistake again.

These days, I still sketch occasionally for pleasure, but I haven't made a film since my college years. I do write poetry, though, and for a while I toyed with making *Homecoming* a novel in verse; I rewrote quite a long section in iambic pentameter before putting the story back into prose. Obviously, I'm a more accomplished fiction writer than poet, but switching genres often provides a kind of clarity and the opportunity for invention I don't get if I simply struggle in one form, and I expect poetry to continue to be part of my writing life.

3. How has your family influenced your writings or art?

My mother was always interested in culture, so I was raised taking art classes and going to museums and concerts, and any creative activity I took up as a child was encouraged. More specifically, the fact that I had an autistic older brother prompted my interest in disability—and in fact, in the broader question of what it means to be "normal." That preoccupation, of course, is one of the threads that led ultimately to *Homecoming*, though when people ask if I see Howard Kapostash as a fictionalized version of my brother Hank, I have to say no. Hank was born with his disability, while Howard acquired his disability in Vietnam, our great national catastrophe (until now). For this reason, Howard

feels a degree of loss I doubt my brother ever experienced, and that sense of loss is a primary emotional component of the story.

4. What is your impression of Germany? Did your fathers' experience as a prosecutor in Nuremberg influenced your perception of Germany?

My parents were young and in love when they moved to Nuremberg, and for that reason it was a happy time for them. My father had not served in the army because of a heart condition, and neither of my parents had been abroad before, so they were particularly shocked by the devastation they found on their arrival in Europe. Both my mother and father made lifelong friends in Germany—people they continued to visit through the 1950's and 1960's—and they were deeply disturbed by the disparities between their own comfort and happiness and the difficult lives their German friends were leading. And so those two years were transformative for my mother and dad; understanding war's effects on ordinary citizens served to awaken them politically, and I was raised in a liberal, seriously anti-war household. My father, now 87 years old, has worked for peace all his life and continues to do so.

In the 60's, both my parents opposed the Vietnam War, though for a while it seemed likely that I might have to serve. Some of these sentiments, of course, found their way into the novel.

5. What's a favorite book or author that you feel has been under-appreciated by the wider literary world?

The Book of Ebenezer LePage, by G. B. Edwards, is a novel I feel more people should know about—and a book that bears some slight similarities to *Homecoming*. The protagonist has spent his entire existence on the Channel Islands, and as he relates his life story we see most of 20th century history passing by, though everything's refracted and colored by our narrator's provincial views, his difficulties in love, and his fear that death will come without his discovering a life's purpose. The book is a vivid, unique, occasionally comic, and ultimately heartbreaking work, but it's also a formal miracle: a convincingly narrated testimonial that never once falters.