

Unbridled Books



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Q & A with Jack Fuller,
author of
ABBEVILLE

A Midwest Connections Pick!

1. This novel is based on your grandfather's life. How true to life are the events in the book?

The depiction of Karl late in his life is very true to the grandfather I knew as a boy: He tended the two-room schoolhouse, delivered the mail with a wooden handcart, swatted bees on the porch, and was treated by everyone in town (Papineau, Illinois) with great affection. Karl's early life in the novel is largely fiction. My grandfather never worked in a logging camp, did not work for his uncle in Chicago (though he was a member of the Board of Trade later in life), and did not serve in World War I in any capacity. He did attend the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago and later built a dynamo in Papineau. The rough outlines of Karl's experience in Abbeville during the Depression follow what I know from my mother. But her memory of that period is very selective. When I have asked her questions about what exactly my grandfather did that landed him in jail, she has answered only vaguely. So the simple fact is that I don't know. And I decided it was better as a writer not to know. Instead I let the character of Karl lead me to his own truth.

2. This novel comes from the heart of the Midwest, but it is a tale with lessons for every heart. How important was the setting to your novel?

The place meant everything. That's why it gave the book its title. From the place came the novel's whole approach to language, the quality of the interactions among people. More fundamentally, Abbeville is a story of the great, uncontrollable natural cycles and the way fragile human beings deal with them. On the endless, flat plains of Central Illinois they roll in like storms you can see coming all the way from the horizon. The turning of the seasons turns everything and everybody. I have lived in the Midwest virtually all my life. I spent a lot of my childhood in the tiny town of Papineau. Abbeville has been inside me forever, waiting to get out.

3. You have written a number of acclaimed novels. None of the subjects are the same, however. What draws you to a particular subject and how hard is it to write such different stories, peopled by such different characters? How do you choose your subjects?

What draws me as a novelist is deep discomfort. Something important eludes my understanding, let alone my ability to speak it. In my last novel, *The Best of Jackson Payne*, it was race. In *Our Father's Shadows* it was the mystery of inheritance—what we receive from our parents through our genes and through the way we are raised. In *Fragments* it was the horrible ambiguities of the Vietnam War. In *Convergence* it was radical intellectual skepticism and the way it played out to fatal consequence in the game of spy against spy. One of the *Chicago Tribune* editorials for which I won the Pulitzer Prize was a fairly straightforward statement of things I learned in writing the novel *Mass*, about the moral and emotional effects of living under the threat of nuclear extinction. I could not have written that essay without having first written the novel.

I write fiction in order to deepen my understanding of important things. I write because the characters and the story the characters disclose to me lead me to a place I don't think I could get to any other way. Recently I was reading an article by a neuroscientist who wrote that fiction and poetry are the expression of emotions too complex to be described any other way. For me, the writing of fiction is how I learn what the deep discomfort really is trying to say. My hope is that the stories will speak to others the same way.

4. Your career as a journalist is quite impressive (Pulitzer Prize winner, no less!) Did your journalism influence your fiction in any way?

As a novelist, journalism provided me a range of raw experience. I served as a police reporter for many years (starting when I was 18 years old), a war correspondent, a Washington correspondent. Journalism put me in the vanguard of the invasion of Cambodia. It placed me at Michigan Avenue and Balbo Street when the Chicago Police charged the protestors at the Democratic National Convention of 1968. It took me to the *Washington Post* newsroom the morning

after the Watergate break-in. This is more than witnessing historic events. The deepest experience was witnessing the way people respond to history's extremity.

One other thing, not to be underestimated: Journalism for several decades paid me to practice every day the basics of writing.

5. What are the most important things, in your mind, for journalists to consider in this new century? What about novelists?

Journalists in the 21st Century are speaking to an audience immersed in messages, overloaded with them. Their challenge is paradoxical--how to inform people who have too much information. The issue is how to get to people the knowledge they really need in order to make their sovereign choices thoughtfully. And the danger is that the public will be like survivors on a life raft, surrounded by water but dying of thirst. This challenge, and the effects of the collision of the radically new information environment on the very ancient information processors we call our brains, is the subject of a non-fiction book I am in the midst of writing.

As for novelists, the literary challenge is as it has always been—to tell the truth about something important enough for fiction. The economic challenge is related to the one facing journalists—how to reach an audience that is driven to distraction by choices.

6. What do you hope readers will take away from your novel?

I hope readers find in Abbeville characters to love and situations rich and deep enough to savor. It is a novel about the central problem for all of us: How shall we live our lives in the face of forces we cannot control?

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