

MADWELL BROWN: SYNOPSIS

Obie Poole is a man with a lot of stories to tell and only one serious listener, an orphan named Rachael, whom he gruffly stewarded into adulthood. And even she has her doubts about his tales: dusty memories from the long ago summers of the Negro Baseball League era, far flung accounts dreamt back to the best and worst days of burdened men.

Obie, now on his death bed in Cairo, Illinois, claims to have played ball with her grandfather Madewell Brown, who disappeared decades ago in Guadalupe, New Mexico. And in Guadalupe, another old man Ruffino Trujillo is dying with a vital heirloom in his possession, an aging canvass bag containing cryptic memorabilia and an unmailed letter addressed over fifty years ago to Obie. After the man dies, his son Cipriano mails the missive, and when it finds its way to Rachael, inspires her to set out on a journey that will reveal the truth about what happened to her grandfather.

Madewell Brown is the fourth installment of Rick Collignon's Guadalupe series. It picks up a thread of his second novel *Perdido*, in which the mysterious Brown disappears after a reclusive six-year existence in the New Mexico town to which each novel returns.

In Collignon's dry, unsentimental landscapes, whether in the Midwest or West, life is a rough but rich row to hoe for his characters. Obie has survived his fate-troubled teammates, but the purpose of that survival seems threadbare until the ragged but stout-hearted Rachael appears. Cipriano has little understanding of his father until in death Ruffino yields evidence of the most compelling moment in his youth. Rachael, abandoned as a child, rediscovers her connection to the world in the form of an irritable old man, apparently done with the world long ago.

The people who flesh out *Madewell Brown* move through life, inch by painful and surprising inch, toward accidentally winning the gifts they had long given up on. Worlds and individuals come together aching and begrudgingly. When Rachael goes to New Mexico to search for information about her grandfather, she is even more unwelcome than those many years ago when she appeared in dirty hair ribbons in front of Poole's porch. Yet she is determined to get what she has come after, though a few in the town are dangerously determined to deny it to her.

Rick Collignon's lyrical yet unromanticized narrative conjures a tough watercolor world of truths and wonders. It is wordsmith witchcraft. And *Madewell Brown* yet another of Collignon's spells well cast.

MADEWELL BROWN: AUTHOR PROFILE

Rick Collignon is such a work-a-day, down-to-earth fellow, that to call him unpretentious would almost be slightly pretentious. His manner and perspective are basic and rustic like his straightforward, unpadding prose and the wind-battered valleys of Illinois and New Mexico, the states where he grew up and grew older.

When he is not writing he works as a roofer, a job that he likes because its solitude allows him to think. And his thinking leads to writing, first-rate.

His debut novel *The Journal of Antonio Montoya* was published in 1996. That was the beginning of a great, fresh literary sprawl through the lives of a collection of New Mexicans and Midwesterners that grew to include *Perdido* (1997) and *A Santa in the Image of Cristóbal Garcia* (2002);

Madewell Brown is his fourth book and has with it a plot that revisits the characters and events of those of the first three books. In Collignon's world a book is not over when the last page has been written. The realism that pervades Collignon's life emerges in his novels.

"I don't think anyone ever gets to know everything," Collignon said to Dan Wickett of "Emerging Writers Forum" in 2002. "People leave your life, things happen in silence and to feel a need to tie up every loose end is like a contradiction of what life is."

MADEWELL BROWN: AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Where did you get the desire to write?

Indirectly, from my mother. What she gave me was the love of reading, the ability to dream. What my father gave me were other things, darker things. My desire to write as a child grew out of my desire to read until they became the same thing. It wasn't so much that I told myself that one day I would write, but rather words and stories were constantly in my mind.

Did the decision to set the story in Cairo, Illinois have anything to do with your originally being from the Chicago area? Why does the southern Illinois region interest you?

My roots are in Illinois and there is this nostalgia in me for heat and cold and water and corn. I had a great time hanging out with Obie and Rachael on the old man's porch. It was nice to write about snakes and bugs, especially in contrast to New Mexico. I chose Illinois because I remembered it.

Yet, I have never been to Cairo. I got hung up on the word Cairo and couldn't get it out of my head. I've never been there and my only memories of it were newspaper stories about rioting in the late sixties.

What brought you to New Mexico?

After high school I attended two Midwestern colleges, hanging on as a student until I finally quit and hit the road. Where the road took me was New Mexico.

Which elements in your childhood influenced your writing? That is, did what you experienced or learned or liked when you were growing up resurface in some way in your stories?

I think all writers are thieves and borrowers. You steal from your children, your spouse, the woman or man next door. Most of all I've used my childhood and twisted it in different ways. I remember reading about some writer from the last decade and the line read, "and like most writers, he was blessed with a miserable childhood." I guess that says it.

In this story younger people listen to the stories of older people. Have you ever found yourself as story receiver or storyteller across a generational divide? And have you found material for your fiction in the tales handed down by older family members? If so, please elaborate.

I realized not so long ago that most of my novels take off with someone old telling stories and, for the life of me, I can't find that in my background. But there is something that draws me to age. Even in *Madewell Brown* the novel didn't take off until Obie Poole wandered into my mind, seemingly from nowhere. I saw my grandfather just before he died. He was ninety-four and a part of me thought there might be some wisdom to be found here. And all he told me, in an Italian accent, was, "Ricky, I never thought this would happen to me."

Why did you choose to write interconnected books in which characters from a previous work re-emerge in another?

I wanted to write three books about a place. The place was Guadalupe. I never thought of them as a trilogy or conceived of them as being inter-connected. But what I found in the writing of them is that people from other books keep popping up, as if they have some stupid desire to put their two cents in. There's a few I keep away from though—the ones that, if given a chance, would take the book over. I kind of see it as if I were in a small town and I might run into anyone at the post office.

What drew you to the subject of the Negro League baseball era?

God, Negro League Baseball. The writing of *Madewell Brown* was such a confusing road for me that at the end I was like, "Damn, so this is what this book is about," which means this is a difficult question for me to answer. Maybe I'll try to keep it short.

I've always liked to go to places I don't belong. I've always loved the game of baseball. When I was old enough to become aware of the disparities between races and cultures the concept blew me away. A black family somehow rented a house in the village I grew up in and a cross was burned in their yard. That made a lasting impression on me.

Some say history is being short-changed in U.S. schools and American students do not know much about their national and individual backgrounds. Do you think that is true?

I think our whole culture short changes our children. In truth, I've come to believe that I live in a place that, for all its talk, doesn't even like children. From the state of our schools to lack of health care to what one sees on the media to kids not being much more than a market. I suspect schools are doing the best they can, but they don't seem to have much of a chance.

This book encompasses people of cultures that presumably are not your own. How are you able to write so authentically about Hispanic and black characters?

As I said, I am intrigued by places that I do not belong to. And I wanted to explore what it was like to be a black ballplayer back then and never get even the chance to play white baseball. I guess all those things are what drew me in. On top of all that, Madewell Brown was a character in one of my earlier books. He really didn't have much more than a walk on scene, but I never forgot about him.

Who are your favorite authors? And have their styles inspired yours at times?

Raymond Chandler made me see how the roots of what happens today are buried far in the past. Gabriel Marquez made me aware that anything can happen.

What are you working on next? Will it pick up where *Madewell Brown* left off?

What's next? Damn, I wish I knew.

MADWELL BROWN: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think the book's title means? Does it tie in with the story? If so, how?
2. What do you think Rachael's life was like at the South Cairo Home? Can you imagine the circumstances of her mother's departure? If so, why do you imagine her mother left?
3. Why does Obie Poole talk so much about the past despite its pain and hardship?
4. Why does Rachael listen to Obie despite her doubts? Why do the two become tied to each other?
5. What do you think makes Cipriano and his father so emotionally distant from each other?
6. What kind of life has Ruffino had? Where do you think his cold-heartedness comes from?

7. How do the people of Guadalupe perceive Madewell Brown?
8. Why is it so important for Rachael to travel to Guadalupe? Would you have gone there if you were her?
9. Collignon's narrative is lean, but his story covers a lot of ground. What things are not specifically said but implied about Ruffino, Cipriano, Obie, Rachael, and Madewell?
10. What did finding the canvas bag teach Cipriano about his father and life generally? Do you imagine he will be changed by the experience? If so, how?
11. Why does Cipriano want to deliver the canvas to Rachael? How is he different from his father?
12. In this story people look toward the past for answers to questions important to them. But just how vital is the past and history in making us the people we are today? And at what past generation, if any, do people cease to have an impact on us?

RECOMMENDED READING:

The Journey of Antonio Montoya by Rick Collignon

Perdido by Rick Collignon

A Santo in the Image of Cristóbal Garcia by Rick Collignon

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

All the Pretty Horses by Cormac McCarthy

Home by Marilynne Robinson