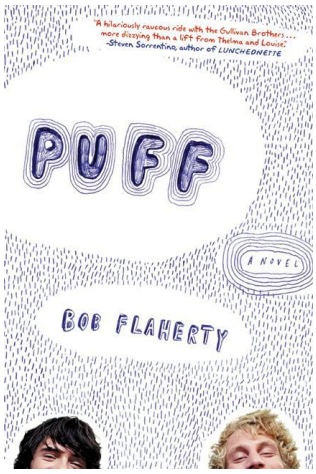
Author Essay



Bob Flaherty

Puff
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Puff: Up close and personal.

I first wrote about the Puff in a writing workshop. Before I joined the workshop, the only writing I'd done since college were the captions to my many cartoons. I'd always wanted to write about what my brother and I saw as our direct involvement in the Blizzard of '78. But some years had to pass to give it clarity, I guess. When you are brash, young and silly, your frame of reference to the distant past is limited to about 5 years: "Haw, haw, haw! Remember when Oatsy got bagged taking a whizz out the metal shop window and kept on pissing even when they had him?" But when a decade goes by and God forbid another one, that yarn you've spun for 20 years takes on deeper meaning, and your heart beats fast as you scribble whole passages in your notebook.

I did not possess a computer when I joined the writing workshop. I also did not possess a word processor, which would have been as daunting for me to operate as a cotton gin. A typewriter I had. Or so I thought. It took half a day to find it and when I tried to bring it back to life, all the keys stuck in the middle like field hockey sticks. This was on a Monday. The workshop met on Thursday night and it was my turn to bring in a manuscript to be critiqued by the group. My maiden voyage. WHAT pressure?!!! On Tuesday I borrowed a typewriter from the next door neighbor, an electric one no less, and typed three good sentences about a certain shitbox van. That's when the ribbon to the electric typewriter tore itself asunder and hung there like a defeated flag. The fourth sentence was soooooo good too, I'm telling you, so rich and descriptive and lovely that I kept typing and typing it, trying to muscle it in, hitting the keys again and again in futility. On Wednesday I borrowed a typewriter from work, this old, abused tin can that was used to type labels on audio cartridges for commercials to be aired. It didn't matter to anyone that 7 or 8 of the keys stuck or that two of the vowels didn't work at all — it was all shorthand anyway. But to a writer of my stature, and one whose first deadline was breathing down his neck, it would not do at all. I ended up writing the first installment of **Puff** with a Sharpie, in big cartoon letters like Al Capp, and the letters would get bigger and bolder as the action heated up, but so caught up in the telling of the tale was I, that I paid it little mind. When I finished, at 6:30 in the morning, I had filled eighty pages and my hand had deformed itself into a palsied, tortured paw. I then spent half that month's rent on copies and presented it to my group, who loved it to death. Not long after that, my wife Annemarie and two of my sisters kicked in for a word processor and the world was changed forever.

Annemarie and I met during the Blizzard of '78. Our date began in earnest when the van ran out of gas. She was a collegiate gymnast and simply attacked the snow, climbing up on ledges and doing full twisting dismounts into the drifts. She had me jumping off things you have no right to jump off. I had never met any girls this brave (this was a long time before any X Games) and she had this exuberance that just shone out of her. She was also brave enough (or nuts enough) to break into a school to get warm. We were, and are, made for each other.

Puff swerves and skids through most of the Boston neighborhoods I grew up in — Mattapan, Dorchester, Roslindale — and bordering towns, fictitious and not.

Some of the names have been changed to protect the innocent, or at least the deceased. Mom, after much brainstorming, became Ma. We called our father Fat Dad, a name that stuck when he quit smoking, discovered such delicacies as FOOD, and grew this little belly overnight that stuck out of his otherwise gaunt and scrawny frame like someone else's ass. But in the book he is cleverly disguised as just plain Dad. And he did own a distribution agency and, yes, we did destroy it one night in an "all-out frenzy of retardation." Monsignor Burke is based closely on the real-life Monsignor Flaherty, a battleaxe of historic proportions, who did once chase me with a hickory cane through the streets of Milton — the town Morton is based on.

But to tell the tale of Greater Boston in the 60s and 70s, you have to bring in race. I died laughing the first time I was called a niggerlover. You might've thought that'd gone out with Atticus Finch, but no. It amused me because I was a lover of not much of anybody. I liked a few people and disliked a whole bunch so to suggest I was a niggerlover because no, I *didn't* think all the blacks in Roxbury should be tarred, feathered and sent on a boat back to Africa, was priceless. "The goddamn jigs are taking over everything!" was a cry often heard. To hear some of them talk, you'd think we were surrounded by an amassment of Zulus with poison-tipped spears.

What mostly happened is that some hardworking black family might use the G.I. bill to buy a little house on Itasca Street and all the whites for a 2-mile radius would brand their former neighbor a traitor and make tracks for the suburbs, opening up more and more dwellings, until 3/4 of Mattapan was black. Many of these forward-thinking people, of course, could not actually *afford* the suburbs, so it was curious to watch them work double shifts and be dead on their feet watering their lawns, all the while cursing the blacks who drove them from their homes. Most of these people were either Jewish or Irish, I observed, folks you might think would have some perspective. I often heard Fat Dad ask the short order cooks and cabbies he knew why they would do this, why they would give up the homes and neighborhoods they'd lived in all their lives. "What, and live with niggers?" came the common reply, eyes wide and incredulous.

Most of my youth was spent in a predominantly white neighborhood, in a house that had been my grandfather's. If you stepped onto the sidewalk and walked not fifteen minutes, you would be in an all-black neighborhood. You were advised by many to never cross that line, that if you set foot in that steaming hellhole you may never come back. I crossed that line all the time, initially to prove a point, later to obtain work, even later to date black girls. Nobody ever got in my face, and some guys were even cool. But one night, when I was working as a janitor at the Peter Bent Brigham hospital and accepted a lift home from a bunch of blacks I worked with, we got a brick thrown at us by a white guy in a flannel shirt and it smashed in my backseat window, which convinced me that my presence in the car was what incited the attack and I wanted to get out and tear somebody's throat out, right there on Dot Ave., but my buds wouldn't let me and just kept on driving. I heard a great many stories growing up about marauding black gangs attacking innocent white citizens, but the only incidents I actually witnessed had whites attacking blacks. I was in Southie once for the Saint Pat's parade, and there was a slowdown up ahead, which trapped an all-black Marine color guard in the middle of a drunken Irish mob, who pelted the 4 Marines with

taunts and then bottles until they ran for their lives. I wasn't much for making friends in my adolescence, but I sure as hell knew who the enemy was.

John is about 23 in the book and Gully is about 21. Masquerading as Red Cross workers and think you'll get away with it is what I love about 23. Not a thought given to the consequences, the danger — let's just see how far we get. There is an incident in the book where Gully squares off against the commanding officer at his pre-induction into the Naval Reserve. The incident is true, almost word for word, except that I was the star of the story in real life, not my brother. For some reason, it made more sense to give it to Gully.

Finally, there is one symbolic aspect of **Puff** I'd like to clear up. When the van is finally destroyed, and with it the brothers' coveted collection of Marvel Comics, there's a suggestion that a certain milestone has passed, and that John and Gully are in that "*but when I became a man I put away childish things*" zone. Fine. But I am here to tell you (and I think I can speak for my brother) that issue #44 of Fantastic Four, also known as "The Battle of the Baxter Building," is the single greatest piece of literature ever put on paper. And I will say that with my dying breath.

Bob Flaherty