
Keith Kachtick

Hungry Ghost
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Your protagonist Carter Cox has a particular, almost compartmentalized relationship with Buddhism. Additionally, he came to the religion in a deeply personal way. Tell us a little about your own relationship with Buddhism — how you began practicing, the role it plays in your life/work, and how it informed the novel.

I never officially decided to become Buddhist. Over the years I just gradually realized that I am Buddhist. I sit for 40 minutes each morning, go on retreats with Tibetan lamas a couple of times a year, co-teach meditation/yoga classes around New York state. Ideally, everything I do serves my spiritual practice, including writing. The more I've gotten to know about (and appreciate) the Dharma, the more interested I've become in other spiritual practices — that's one of the reasons why *Hungry Ghost's* most moral character is Christian. Spirituality — whether found in a formalized religion, or while rock-climbing or throwing clay on a potter's wheel — is about discovering and sharing light. I firmly believe what mystic Eckhart Tolle says is true: Anything that's not spiritual ultimately becomes little more than that three-inch dash between the death date and the birth date on our tombstones.

***Hungry Ghost* seems, in many ways, to be a Social Novel, one that wrestles with the larger ideas of goodness (ethics, morality), personal transgression, guilt and shame. At the same time, its tone is light and witty, its pace is quick and exciting. Did you set out to write a novel that was a hybrid of a book of ideas and a book of entertainment, or was this something that developed naturally?**

For me, good art does three things: it entertains, it informs, and it inspires. The challenge with writing a novel that tries to do those things is to teach without being preachy, to be didactic in a way that doesn't leave the reader rolling his or her eyes. Though *Hungry Ghost's* entertainment value is essentially sugar for the medicine, I hope the book is worthwhile as a work of literature, too. I knew only this about *Hungry Ghost* when I wrote its first page: the book would be a portrait of spiritual growth and of the redemptive power of love, and would end with the words "I do."

Could you talk about the style of writing you used in the novel — the second person narration, the several omniscient flights of perception, the dual ending?

Hungry Ghost is written in second person, from the point of view of the protagonist's Buddha Nature, his omniscient higher self. The narration directly addresses Carter and allows — nudges — him to see things that his ego-driven lower self is reluctant to acknowledge. The book's two endings were intended to show how we come to forks in the road all the time, and the ramifications of our choosing the selfish path, versus the potential benefit of our choosing the more selfless path.

There haven't been many contemporary novels that have dealt with Buddhism, let alone religion or spirituality in general. Have there been any books that served as models for you? Are there other novelists that have tackled notions of faith and belief in particularly inspiring ways?

I was saddened to see, in a recent interview with some top American magazine and book editors, the general disdain most of them have for spiritual fiction. One editor said he wouldn't even consider reviewing a spiritual novel unless the book was a satire. This is troubling, and is a primary reason why it's so difficult to find literary novels these days tackling the notion of faith (and perplexing, since so many of Barnes and Noble's shelves are filled with books devoted to self-help). I know of only a handful of contemporary Buddhist novelists — Peter Matthiessen, Kate Wheeler, Jim Harrison, Alice Walker — and even among them you'd be hard pressed to find a book explicitly about Buddhism.

What is your next project? Do you plan to write more fiction?

I'm working on a new novel, called *Light in the Ruins*, which I hope to complete this autumn. It's about four characters (a teenage gang member, a widowed yoga instructor, the son of two famous Zen authors, and a Dutch photo-dealer living on Bali), all connected to the murder of a New York cab driver. Each has a "realization experience" in the months after the shooting, and eventually they cross one another's paths. My goal for the book: to make real for the reader the reality of enlightenment.