
Karen Osborn

The River Road
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An Interview with Karen Osborn

You said that the tragedy of a student's death that happened when you were teaching inspired the story and that it haunted you for 10 years before you wrote about it. Do you think your story will have the same effect on its readers? Are you still disturbed by the events?

Sometimes writing about an event is a kind of exorcism, a way of resolving what haunts us, but in this case the telling became a reinventing of the tragedy, an attempt to get at and lay bare the frightening reality of how quickly and relentlessly the world can unravel. Maybe because of this, I'm haunted even more by what happened since the writing of the book. If I have done my job as an author, then the story will stay with readers, will haunt them also. As we go through life we have to grow larger in order to carry both the happiness and the sorrows of what happens around us, including events like 9-11 and other tragedies. I think this ability to be touched by both the joys of life and its tragedies makes us more human. It brings us closer to the essence of what it is to be alive.

You did a lot of research on the Connecticut River. Do you think it was necessary? Do you feel that it gave your characters more depth, made them more real?

People are formed by the landscape where they live or grow up. Having grown up myself on the banks of a river, I know that I carry its rhythms with me -- the way it would rise in the spring, often to a dangerous height, then shrink in late summer, or sometimes freeze in the winter, the rush of the current or gentle lapping against the shore. It's made me aware of how dependent we are on the larger forces of nature, of how vulnerable we are.

I wanted my characters to have that knowledge or awareness also. Kevin counters that knowledge and the anxiety or fear that it produces with his amassing of facts, his ordering of historical events. The irony is that the telling of the past can unravel also, as it is absolutely dependent on the relative points of view from which the story is being told. Jen's attempts to save or rescue the animals are her way of surviving emotionally in a world that can be nourished by the rich silt the water carries or conversely, washed away. Ellen's sculptures use the clay deposited over the hundreds of years the river has flowed. Both Kay's and Michael's views of the river are more romanticized. They still remember playing in it and using it as a medium for their inventions. It is a place of both love and death, a place where the gods reside and where human beings can be stripped of all their mannerisms and even their sense of ethics.

The Connecticut River has a fascinating history, having been formed by the receding of the glaciers and having played a major role for centuries in the lives of Native Americans and more recently in the lives of the settlers. While it was easy to become immersed in the research itself, for me such research added another dimension to how and why the characters were motivated and their dreams and nightmares.

Why did you choose to break up the story into different narrators? Why didn't you use David's voice?

The use of different narrators was not a conscious decision to begin with. There were many voices in me clamoring to tell this story -- the voice of longing of the girlfriend, the guilt of the brother, the outrage and grief of the father, and initially, the voices of the mothers. I chose Kevin's voice because it provided a counterpoint to Kay's on which the action of the story could ride. Michael and Kay were both important because they were on the bridge that night and even years later the event resonated through them. They also held two of the points of the triangle that had existed between all three.

My intention in not using David's voice was to make his presence more palpable. He becomes a character or a person as remembered by the others, so that just as it's impossible to know what actually happened that night on the bridge, it's impossible to truly know who David was. His father remembers him as the perfect son, Michael sees him as a rival, and Kay remembers him as a lover. All of us are multifaceted, in this way. The identity or essence of an individual is a slippery thing, impossible to get one's hands around. Our many different sides are brought out by the complicated ways we relate to others.

What do you think will inspire your next book? Are you working on something now?

I'm inspired by so many of the stories I hear and witness. One source is family ancestral mythology. It has carried me into the realm of history, which is something I've always loved. I've been spending hours looking through old magazines and newspapers, immersing myself in that other world until it seems more real than the one I'm living in. Fictionalizing material or reinventing what has happened in a way that leaves you free to alter specifics enables you to give voice to memory or to what touches us in the human experience. It makes it possible to uncover the truth at the core or the heart of those events so that you can understand more about what it is to be human. It's a reaching for that understanding that motivates me to write, and I hope readers come away with a piece of that.