



Russell Banks

Sweet Hereafter
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Was this book based on a true story or a similar tragedy? If not, what made you think of using a school bus accident as a catalyst in the novel?

It wasn't so much "based on a true story" as it was inspired by a true story. I read a *New York Times* follow-up article on the aftermath of a schoolbus accident in a Mexican-American community in south Texas. A year after the accident, the previously close-knit community had come apart, with families at war with one another, neighbors fighting neighbors, people moving away, and so on, all apparently because of the arrival of out-of-town lawyers generating lawsuits. Simply, I wondered what would happen to a small town community like my own in upstate New York if there were a similar accident (after all, there are dozens of schoolbus accidents, many of them fatal, all across America every year). And I also wondered what would a community feel like and what would it do, if it suffered the sudden loss of its children?

Were you happy with the film version of *The Sweet Hereafter*?

I was very happy with the film, though of course there were some small parts of it that I might have handled differently. But it was Atom Egoyan's film, after all, not mine, and besides, I was eager to see what he would do with the material, not what I would do with it. I was consulted on every draft of the screenplay, however, also on casting, and worked closely with Egoyan from start to finish, even in the editing room and on publicity.

Did you struggle with how, or if, the town would come to terms with Dolores at the end of the novel? Or was the conclusion always clear to you?

Yes, I did struggle with how the town came to terms with Dolores, but also, and perhaps moreso, I worried about how Dolores would come to terms with the town. She is the victim of a lie, after all, Nichole's lie, which saves the town from its own worst instincts and deprives Nichole's father of what he wants most (now that he no longer wants Nichole). But it's a necessary lie, and it provides the town with its necessary scapegoat, so that the community can come together, as they do at the demolition derby, and move on, as they do by raising Nichole on a pedestal and turning their collective back on Dolores. For me, the hardest thing to face was Dolores's utter solitude at the end. I didn't anticipate how painful that would be.

Did you start off writing this novel using four narrators or did earlier drafts have only one? If so, who was the original narrator and why did you change to multiple narrators?

From its inception, the novel was meant to have four narrators. I wanted, among other things, to write a novel in which the community itself was the protagonist, and I was interested in the fate of the collective, rather than in the fate of a single character. I chose four narrators because three wouldn't have represented an entire community, and five would have been redundant by one. A primitive counting system: one, two, three, many