



Back to Wando Passo

By David Payne
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Introduction

From David Payne, who has been hailed as "the most gifted American novelist of his generation" (*Boston Globe*) and has been likened to "Pat Conroy or perhaps a Southern John Irving" (*Winston-Salem Journal*) comes an exquisitely wrought, beautifully told novel about the ties that bind us to the people we love, the legacy of race and the history of family.

Ransom Hill, lead singer of a legendary-but-now-defunct rock group, has traveled home from New York City to South Carolina to try to patch up differences with his estranged wife, Claire. However, back at Wando Passo. Claire's family estate, Ran quickly comes to suspect that his wife of nineteen years may be having an affair. Matters are complicated further when Ran discovers a mysterious black pot of apparent slave manufacture buried on the plantation grounds. The unearthing of this relic transports Ran -- and the reader -- back 150 years, into the story of another love triangle at Wando Passo at

the height of the Civil War, involving Claire's great-great-great-grandmother, Adelaide DeLay.

In the present, when two eroded skeletons turn up buried in shallow graves, Ransom becomes obsessed with the identities of the bodies and what happened to them. Did the past triangle culminate in murder? As his marriage to Claire continues to unravel, Ran begins to wonder whether the pot is leading him, Claire and her new lover toward a similar, tragic outcome in the present.

A fast-paced adventure story filled with lyrical writing, wicked humor, and unforgettable characters, *Back to Wando Passo* propels the two love stories, linked by place through time, to a simultaneous crescendo of betrayal, revenge, and redemption, and asks whether the present is doomed to ceaselessly repeat the past -- or if it can, sometimes, change and redeem it.

Questions for Discussion

1. In an advance comment, novelist Lee Smith writes that *Back to Wando Passo* is "a love story that spans the centuries, going beyond death." Do you agree with that characterization of the book? What did you think of David Payne's treatment of love as a subject? Claire tells Ran, in reference to her feelings for Marcel, "it's like God or some higher power has put this love in front of me, and I must turn to it, I *must*, like a green plant to the sun. I have no power to do otherwise"? Is she doing the right thing? Or is Ransom closer to the mark when he suggests, "What if that's what evil is? Just a form of intoxicating selfishness that feels like goodness, feels like it's from God, but really isn't?"
2. Moving from love to marriage... What did you think of the marriages portrayed in *Back to Wando Passo*? What do you think are the real problems at the heart of Claire and Ransom's marriage? Do you blame her for leaving him? Or for not leaving him sooner? After 19 years of playing the "gardener" to Ransom's "rose," Claire reconsiders. Is that reconsideration selfish and immature or courageous and adult?
3. Why do you think David Payne choose to deliver two stories in this novel instead of one? What advantages accrue from this technique? What differences in style, technique and voice did you notice between the writing in the past and present?
4. Payne writes the past sections in italics and the present sections in roman type. Why? How do you think this reflects what *Back to Wando Passo* is saying about the relationship of the past to the present?
5. What do you make of the voice that Ran calls "Nemo"? Did you take it as a symptom of his manic-depression? Or did you see it as supernatural in origin, the voice of the spirit from the pot? Both?
6. What did you think of the portrait of bipolar disorder or manic-depression in this novel? Some researchers suggest that historical figures as diverse as Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill and Kurt Cobain suffered from this illness -- have you ever encountered it, and what do you think of the line some of its sufferers walk between brilliance, even genius, and dysfunction? Payne writes: "Something had seized hold of Ran, and he remembered the deeper reason why he strayed from his chemical regime... because there came a point where what he had no longer felt like a disease. There came a point when he contacted something in himself he trusted more than medicines or doctors, more, even, than he trusted Claire his wife..." Is this self-delusion on Ransom's part, or a moment of transcendent perception?
7. David Payne's prose is widely admired by critics and readers. What is it that distinguishes his writing? What techniques does he use to establish the novel's mixture of romance and action, and how does he manage to situate and distill *Back to Wando Passo*'s complex emotional landscapes and political/social minefields into a narrative that feels so intimate?
8. Like love, race is one of the central issues in this book. What did you take away from *Back to Wando Passo* on the subject? What did you think and feel about Ransom in the crucial moment in Ch. 21 when he voices the thought, *I am a racist*? David Payne has said: "Too many books on race, it seems to me, still fall into the pattern of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. It's well and good for Scout and Atticus to stand up for the oppressed, downtrodden black folks against the bad white bigots in the town, and it's awfully convenient when it's clear who's good, who's bad and what's at stake. But, to me, it's time to move past this, to see, for example, Atticus grappling with his attraction to Calpurnia and Scout learning to see Calpurnia not only as a maid but also as a potential

stepmother. It seems to me that racism has to be confronted at those subtler, deeper levels." What do you think of the point Payne raises here, and do you feel he succeeded in what he set out to do?

9. The treatment of Palo Mayombe in *Back to Wando Passo* is used not merely to generate spooky effects, but to touch on profound questions of faith, and, in particular, about the survival of the human spirit beyond death. What do you feel about the claims of practitioners that real spirits reside inside these pots or prendas, and that these spirits can act for good or evil in the living human world? How do these claims tally with your personal beliefs?

10. What did you think of the characterizations in the book, particularly of Ransom and Addie? Payne is noted for writing about women with unusual insight -- how does he do with Addie? Claire? What about Ransom, who is mentally ill, driving people crazy, and self-destructive... did you "like" him and sympathize with him in spite of this? And, if so, how do you think Payne managed to walk that line of writing a character at once sympathetic and infuriating?

About the Author

David Payne is the author of four previous novels: *Confessions of a Taoist on Wall Street*, which one the prestigious Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award, *Early from the Dance*, *Ruin Creek*, and *Gravesend Light*. He lives in North Carolina.