

## A CONVERSATION WITH JOE CLIFFORD about *Lamentation*

### TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF, HOW AND WHEN YOU STARTED WRITING.

Two events define my life: my drug addiction, and my near-fatal motorcycle accident. The former has forged a great deal of my career, as *Junkie Love* is the book that helped give me a bit of a name. I started writing when I was a kid. I've been an artist for as long as I can recall. I write. I paint. I play music. When I got straight off heroin in 2000, I dedicated myself to the craft of writing. I earned a couple degrees and tried to make up for lost time. I am a home-owning dad these days, and the only crazy adventures I have are in my head. But I have a lot of experience to draw from.

### WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE YOUR NOVEL? HOW DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE TO ENRICH YOUR STORY?

Unfortunately, I didn't get out of the drug lifestyle unscathed. Well, that's not entirely true. Actually I did. Ridiculously so. Ten years of hardcore heroin and meth addiction, I escaped with my faculties and health intact. Others weren't so lucky. My brother is also an addict and he never bounced back. I have another half-brother (Jay) who is in estate clearing in New Hampshire. I used a composite of my two brothers and myself to form the basis for the Jay / Chris relationship that drives the narrative. I have always been fascinated by brother stories. Which I suppose isn't that rare. Hell, it's practically the first chapter in the Bible. But I am more interested in Kazan's *East of Eden*, James Dean's searing performance, and Springsteen's "Adam Raised a Cain" than I am religious parables. The story of brothers is powerful. A brother is as close as you get to another "you." A son, too, which is also in the story, but that's a little different. Your brother has that same blood, experienced that same upbringing. Often it's two sides of the same coin. That is the heart of *Lamentation*.

*Junkie Love* was the "true" story of my addict life. But even though we released it as a novel, I was still chained to the facts. *Lamentation* allowed me to use the ethos of that experience to extrapolate and elicit the greatest emotional response. Chris's drug addiction is central to the story, and unlike many books I read that try to milk abuse, there is an undeniable verisimilitude to *Lamentation* because I actually lived through it. And I know, first hand, both sides: the addict and the sibling of an addict.

### ARE THERE ANY OTHER CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

Jay is a composite of my half-brother Jay and me. Chris is based on my other brother, Josh, and me. Gerry Lombardi is also loosely based on Jerry Sandusky. And several other characters are based on people I know. Charlie and Brian are based on my friends Jimmy, Charlie, and Brian. Jenny is based on my wife and my guitarist's girlfriend. Adam Lombardi is modeled after our hometown mayor. Though there is nothing in there that is definitive, in terms of their behavior and/or actions. More like I mentally pictured each as I was writing, which is what I suppose an author does with every book.

### WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE OR MOST SYMPATHETIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Chris is my favorite character. As an addict, he is openly scorned, mocked, and derided. But he still had a good heart, which most can't see through the drugs.

## **WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?**

Gerry Lombardi. Actually all the Lombardis, who are family of privilege, which they believe places them above the law. And, of course, they are right. It's one of the neat tricks Jay pulls off in the novel. He recognizes life isn't fair, that men like Gerry Lombardi and his kids are going to get away with crimes, both legally and ethically, that average men won't, and Jay finds a way to level the playing fields and stand up to them best he can.

## **WHAT INSPIRED THE SETTING OF *LAMENTATION*?**

The setting, deep in the New England sticks, is where I grew up. I know that town. I know those people. The Turnpike. The blue-collar work ethic. The small town ties. It's where I come from.

## **WHAT PART OF WRITING YOUR BOOK DID YOU FIND THE MOST CHALLENGING?**

The love story. Challenging, but a very welcome challenge. A lot of my male crime-writing friends eschew (i.e., avoid at all costs) the love story. I don't. Women buy books. And I don't mind admitting that before writing this novel, I read some ... Nicholas Sparks. I don't write like Sparks. Have no desire to write like Sparks. But the man does sell books. And one of the elements I noticed right away is he puts the love story up front. I am not a romance author. But I do believe, like the best rock 'n' roll, a confluence of influences is the way to go.

## **WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT READERS WILL TAKE AWAY FROM YOUR BOOK?**

A brother's love. Even if we don't fully understand another's behavior, those blood ties run deep. And redemption is always possible.

## **WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?**

Salinger and Kerouac are the big two. The former wrote the first book I really fell in love with, and the latter got me to San Francisco. But there are so many more who helped shape my life and work. There is a Facebook tagging going around now, asking everyone to name their ten favorite books.

1. *Catcher in the Rye*, JD Salinger
2. *Razor's Edge*, Somerset Maugham
3. *Gone Girl*, Gillian Flynn
4. *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut
5. *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams
6. *Knockemstiff*, Donald Ray Pollock

7. *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë

8. *War and Peace*, Tolstoy

9. *After Dark My Sweet*, Jim Thompson

10. *Subterraneans*, Jack Kerouac

That's a pretty eclectic mix. Though there is a commonality as well. The search to stay true to oneself, at all costs.

### **WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?**

Depends which stage. I heard a great adage. "Writers don't like writing, they like having written." Then there's this recent gem from Bob Odenkirk: "Whenever someone says, 'I love writing,' I always think, 'You probably suck at writing.'" The process is not fun for me. Especially the early drafts, which I put somewhere between advanced dentistry and sticking a fork in my eye. But I do love the endgame, when the story has taken shape and you can manipulate syntax, play with pace and language, really get into the nooks and intricacies of a particular piece; when you can step back and see the entire creation and extrapolate and tweak for maximum emotional response—that is why I do it.

I suppose the process is the same for me as it is any writer. You sit in the chair, fight the urge to get out (or surf the Internet), and you start laying bricks, pounding nails, building your beast. And after a while, it ceases being "work" and become almost spiritual. I mean, I think that is how it is for everyone.

### **WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?**

"Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." —E.L. Doctorow

### **WHAT IS THE WORST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?**

"Write for yourself." Or some variation of that. It goes back to the Odenkirk quote. Those who profess to "love" writing, almost always follow it with that mantra that it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Which is bullshit. That's not writing; that's a diary. Good writing is all about reaction, it does not take place in a vacuum, and if you don't pay attention to audience you won't have a career. That isn't to say you focus test everything you do. But you have to pay attention to what others think. You need your betas. You need your critiques. And like the best football coaches, you have to be willing to adjust game plans if something isn't working.

### **WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? ANY NEW BOOKS IN THE PIPELINE?**

I recently finished my newest thriller, *Skunk Train*, which follows two teenagers on the run with stolen pot as they head south in California. In many ways, I consider it a sister novel to *Lamentation*. I wrote early drafts simultaneously. And while they are radically different stories, told completely differently, there are some parallels (one is East Coast, the

other West, theme of brothers, etc.). They fit together nicely. But ***Skunk Train*** is a more involved, intricately plotted novel.

I am also editing a collection of short stories called ***Trouble in the Heartland: Crime Stories Based on the Songs of Bruce Springsteen*** (Gutter Books). We've received formal permission from the Boss's camp, with a portion of the proceeds going to benefit wounded veterans, and Dennis Lehane (***Mystic River, Gone Baby Gone, Shutter Island***) has contributed a story.

I have three more books I am editing for Gutter, which will take me through 2014.

There is the online crime zine, *The Flash Fiction Offensive*, which I edit.

And in the spring of 2014, I will begin drafting my new novel. Not sure what that will be about. I have a few plot ideas rolling around my brain. I'd like to do a ***Road to Perdition*** meets ***Heat*** sorta thing. It makes sense in my head. Probably wouldn't to anyone else. This is the early incubation stage.

#### **ANY FINAL WORDS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR WRITING?**

I think ***Lamentation*** is the best thing I've done. Which is what every writer is supposed to feel when he or she finishes. At least until the next book. (I'm pretty excited about SKUNK TRAIN as well.)