A CONVERSATION WITH JOE CLIFFORD about DECEMBER BOYS

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

I’ve been writing, well, writing seriously, since I stopped doing drugs in the early-2000s. I cleaned up, went back to school, earned my degrees. December Boys is my seventh book (fifth published). I get asked this question often. There’s only so many ways you can say I’ve always been an artist. But I’ve always been an artist. Music, painting, writing. That last one is simply the discipline I chose to pour my most sincere efforts. There are not enough hours in my day to pursue all three. I don’t paint anymore, and drawing is limited to goofy pictures for my kid (I mean that literally. I draw Goofy, as in “of Mickey Mouse”). I record an album about once every three or four years with my band, The Wandering Jews.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE THIS NOVEL?

December Boys is the second in the Lamentation series. I wrote the first (Lamentation) with the idea of its possibly being picked up to be a series. Which was nice when I got contracted to write the second one. Much of the novel was already written in my head. I mean, I knew who the villain was, had the plotline, my hero’s arc, a few surprises along the way. Of course things change as you write (no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader—I forget who said that. Probably Stephen King. He’s says all the best stuff). But knowing who my character was, my protagonist, Jay Porter, let me hit the ground running a little faster than last time. That said, these novels are more literary than straight mystery.

HOW DID YOU USE YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE OR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND TO ENRICH YOUR STORY?

Like Lamentation, December Boys, at its heart, deals with the relationship between brothers, as well as addiction issues. Without giving away the plot of either, it’s safe to say drug addiction drives a wedge and complicates things. These are issues I’ve dealt with in real life, on both sides of that delightful coin. As a former addict, I try to be sensitive to clichés. As a writer, of course, you always want to avoid clichés. But there is also this misperception about drugs, this all-or-nothing, black-white, good-bad thing that happens. And it’s pervasive. Get in trouble with the law? Go to AA. That sort of thing. The reality of addiction is far more nuanced. Jay Porter sees the other side a little differently because of his addict brother, Chris.

Also, as a dad, I use my son, Holden, as the basis for Aiden (they are the same age, approximately). I take many of things my son says. For instance, he’ll say, “I love you infinity plus eight-three.” Which is just the way my son says he loves me. No comprehension of mathematics, but it’s cute. That kind of stuff. It’s nice to fuse worlds, add that sort of touch.

ANYTHING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IN YOUR NOVEL?

The setting of the Lamentation series is based on my hometown of Berlin, CT. Kept the geography. In some cases I named characters after people I went to school with. Streets stay the same very often. The diner featured in both books, The Olympic, is the Olympia Diner on the Berlin Turnpike. In these books that turnpike is renamed the Desmond Turnpike. But I retain the notorious thoroughfare’s scandalous reputation.
ARE ANY CHARACTERS BASED ON PEOPLE YOU KNOW?

Charlie is based on my best friend back east, Jimmy. Fisher is loosely based on this guy I knew, peripherally ... Fisher. Jay Porter is based (partially) on my half-brother Jay Streeter. But, of course, being fiction, you take great liberties. Jimmy is not Charlie. Jimmy is a brilliant artist, funny and sharp. Charlie is a little dim. As a writer, you use the real as a springboard for the imagination, so that the end result vacillates wildly from the original.

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

Chris is my most sympathetic character, and, again, he features prominently. In many ways, he is the star of this show.

WHO IS YOUR LEAST SYMPATHIC CHARACTER? AND WHY?

Least sympathetic? I don’t know if I can say any truly are. I mean, you want to find redeeming qualities in all your characters. Even the villain thinks he’s the hero in his own story. That said, Gerry Lombardi is probably the most wretched. That’s if allegations against him are true....

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

The hardest part of writing December Boys was ripping Jay’s life apart again. Lamentation ends, while not happily, with some peace attained. So the first thing I had to do was fuck some shit up. That’s what you do as a writer. “They loved each other very much and nothing ever went wrong” makes for a boring novel! And I like Jay. I like his wife Jenny. I liked that Jay was going to have a chance to be a dad. It sucked throwing obstacles in his way. That said, the troubles he incurs I feel as germane to the life he leads. If you continue most stories, very few live happily ever after. I mean, does anyone really think Lloyd Dobbler holds onto Diane Court more than an hour after Say Anything’s plane takes off?

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

Hope can shine through from the tiniest cracks, when you least expect it....

WHAT WRITERS HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

There’s a whole bunch there. My first son is named Holden. My second is named Jackson Kerouac. So those two are big. But lately Gillian Flynn, Paula Hawkins, Hilary Davidson have probably had the greatest impact. Going back, you can’t write mysteries without a profound love of Raymond Chandler. Jim Thompson, too. Wuthering Heights made a deep impact. Anything by Vonnegut. Guys who don’t get as much attention as they deserve like Donald Westlake, or even Day Keane. I am a very pop culture writer. I like the mainstream. Cooler mainstream. Springsteen over, y’know, whatever the hell kids listen to today. (I am 45. I hate most new music like most 45 year old guys. Except Taylor Swift. Love her.) So I tend to gravitate toward bestsellers. But again, the cool bestsellers like Flynn. I wouldn’t read, say, 50 Shades or whatever. I have an aesthetic. Although Nick Sparks was surprisingly not awful.
WHAT IS THE WRITING PROCESS LIKE FOR YOU?

Depends which part. The first draft is akin to visiting the dentist. The end game and editing? I enjoy that part. Starting is always the worst. Once I have a shape, things get more fun. But, as always, it’s work.

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU’VE EVER RECEIVED?

There’s a lot. I get asked this one often. I usually go with the hard work one, etc. Keep at it, you’ll get published.

WHAT IS THE WORST PIECE OF ADVICE ABOUT WRITING THAT YOU’VE EVER RECEIVED?

This one never changes. “Write for yourself.” Hands-down the worst advice you can give a writer. Writing for yourself is what you do with your journal when you’re 16. If you want to do this for a career, you write for yourself AND an audience. And one of those two is far more important.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR YOU? ANY NEW BOOKS IN THE PIPELINE?

I have a book I’ve finished called Occam’s Razor, which I think is the best thing I’ve done. It’s a first person, mainstream mystery, which I am hoping my agent, Liz, places soon. And I have more ideas for novels. I would like to do a follow-up to Junkie Love, a more encompassing look at the drug years. Less stylistic, more informative. But, y’know, still gritty and all that. I also have an idea for a new mystery/thriller that I am pretty sure will hit big.

ANY FINAL WORDS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY ABOUT YOURSELF, YOUR NOVEL, OR LIFE IN GENERAL?

The 6:30 show is different than the 9:30 show, and don’t forget to tip your waitress!