Interview with Steven Wingate
The Creative Process and His New Novel Of Fathers and Fire
interview by Jacob Ford

Which of your works is your favorite? Which are you most proud of?
I don’t think in terms of favorites so much as which works I think represent me best—which ones, if it all ended tomorrow, I’d want to be remembered for. If I can turn the question that way, I’d say the two books of fiction are the most important: my 2008 short story collection Wifeshopping and the novel that’s just about to come out, Of Fathers and Fire. One was my first book of any kind, the other my first novel. So they hold a lot of weight for me. Among the other works I’ve done, which are spread all over the genre map, I’d say the digital memoir daddylabyrinth is the most significant to me. It helped me work through a lot of things that were weighing me down and I have no idea who I’d be if I hadn’t made it.

Tell me about your writing process. Do you have a specific goal in mind while you are writing?
I aim to be as emotionally truthful as possible whenever I write and forge the clearest sentences I can, whether it’s in a first draft or a revision. I’m not particularly interested in style, and I think it gets in the way. Style is something I feel writers achieve by being emotionally truthful and writing clear sentences, not by a simple manipulation of language. I’m suspicious of writers who focus too much on style, and always think they’re trying to sell me something. I tend to have a lot of “put away time” for my work—months or years when I’m not working on it but letting the dough rise so I can go back and punch it down again by making the sentences clearer and laying the emotional truth more bare. This means my books can take a decade to come into being, which is something I find frustrating about myself. I’d like to speed up my process a bit because you never know how many productive years you have left on earth, and I don’t want to spend them all waiting to punch the dough down.

Where do you look for inspiration?
I don’t. I’m compelled to write to try making sense of myself and the world I live in, and if I don’t write for more than a few days I’m extremely difficult to be around—even to myself. All the inspiration I need to write is in the set of emotional forces that made me a writer in the first place.
On your website you call yourself a “genre nomad.” You’ve worked in several different genres—prose, screenwriting, even storytelling through an interactive online medium. How do you decide which genre/medium to work into? Does the genre or the story come first?

Mostly the genre and the story come at the same time. I’ve only rarely had the experience of starting out in one genre and ending up in another, and that’s typically a matter of deciding whether a poem should be in line or in prose, or maybe expanded into flash fiction. The emotional material that drives a given work certainly has a shapelessness to it before I start working on it, and it could be pulled in many directions. But once I decide I’m going to make something I have a strong sense of what kind of thing it will be. I always knew *Wifeshopping* would be short stories, always knew *Thirty-One Octets* would be invented form prose poetry, always knew *daddylabyrinth* would be a digital project. But before they started coming into being, when they were just sloshing around inside me, I had no idea what they were going to be. Once I decided what they were, everything went forward at once.

Who do you write for?

Myself, my characters, my readers. I’m compelled to write, as I mentioned above, to try understanding things. It may sound strange to say that I write for my characters, since they’re usually imaginary. But I want to give them love and respect as if they’re real, and that desire drives me to make them as full and complete as I can get them. The word “empathy” gets bandied around a lot in fiction circles, but I think it’s overused. I don’t empathize with my characters, I love them. To me that’s the best chance I have of giving them life in readers’ minds.

As for readers—well, you don’t really have the literary experience without them. They’re essential to the formula. I hope to create emotionally true moments in my characters that will resonate with my readers and make them feel their own emotional truth, which is different from mine. To me that’s the alchemy of literature, the reason I’m in this game as both a reader and a writer.

Do you feel uncomfortable writing about personal topics?

Not really. If I wanted to keep them to myself I would never have become a writer in the first place, or I would have become a different kind of writer. I don’t think there’s any value in keeping our inner lives secret. Though I must say it’s pretty interesting, as someone who’s primarily a fiction writer, to see how often readers simply assume that I’m writing thinly-veiled autobiography. It’s an occupational hazard because people assume you’re “writing what you know.”

Tell me a little bit about your upcoming novel, *Of Fathers and Fire*.

It’s set in the summer of 1980 in a tiny, dusty (and entirely fictional) junkyard town called Suborney, Colorado, where seventeen-year-old Tommy Sandor lives with his single mom, Connie. She’s been telling him that his father is a sax player from New York City who doesn’t even know he has a son, but that’s a lie. His real father is actually Richie Thorpe, who spent sixteen years in prison for arson and involuntary manslaughter and has come to Suborney looking to reclaim his son. As you might expect, this causes more than a few sparks.

So the foreground story is a classic Bildungsroman—a coming of age novel. Who will Tommy Sandor become? The background story is more is about national identity, particularly in regard to militarism and the weaponization of fundamentalist Christianity. Its central question is What will America become?

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

Write consistently to develop a habit that you don’t want to let slip. Be willing to throw away what’s no good. Celebrate your successes at every level, no matter how small, because you’ll spend a great deal of your time alone wondering why things aren’t working the way you want them to on the page. Always try to push yourself to do the thing you don’t believe you can do yet, but always be patient with yourself as you try.
How did you decide on the setting for *Of Fathers and Fire*?

I spent my teenage years on the southeastern edge of Colorado Springs, and once I got past my backyard gate there was pretty much nothing for six hundred miles until you got to Kansas City. I came to this environment at thirteen after growing up eight miles from New York City, so the change was a huge jolt. Solitude and open space became part of my life and I wandered the fields whenever I could, hanging out among the cows and calling to birds and learning to spot rattlesnakes.

It was the environment I became myself in, so it felt natural to make it the one Tommy Sandor became himself in. His challenges in life are very different from mine, but that high plains landscape is something we share.

*Of Fathers and Fire* features the protagonist “wrestling” with topics including the Iran hostage crisis, the Reagan presidency, and the political rise of the Christian right. How do you go about writing on political or controversial topics?

No differently than I’d write about the difficult topics in a character’s life. We’re all living in the middle of controversial topics twenty-four hours a day—they’re in the air we breathe. It’s only self-delusion that makes us think we’re in any way separate from them.

The big political things reverberate in the way we think about ourselves. When I was Tommy Sandor’s age, the fear of going to war in Iran was extremely palpable to me and pervaded my thinking. The “big picture” circumstances of our lives affect us on a cellular level. They are constant themes that sound in the symphonies of our lives, and part of my job as a writer is to make readers feel like they’re going through it themselves.

What are major themes you want your reader to take away from *Of Fathers and Fire*?

That’s a very literary criticism kind of question, and I don’t have a literary criticism approach to making literature. Theme is what emerges from story and language, and it emerges from readers depending on their own personal backgrounds and proclivities. I can’t control that and I don’t try to. If I create full enough characters who are made real by their internal conflicts, then people can pull out of my stories whatever themes they’re inclined to pull out.

What I want readers to feel is the wrestling match you mention in the question just above. Not only Tommy’s wrestling match with himself, but America’s wrestling match with itself. If Tommy’s wrestling can resonate with my readers’ wrestling, and if my readers can see the resonances between America in 1980 and America today, then I feel like I’ve done my job. Other people can talk about theme and I’ll move on to the next story.

What is your next writing project?

I’m writing a novel set in South Dakota—the first work I’ve set here—that’s about two pill-popping orphans trying to make a last stand together before their lives fall apart. I had an earlier version of it set in Boulder, where I lived much of my adult life, but decided to bring it up here a few years after I started teaching at SDSU. I needed a way to reconcile with how to live here—a way to wrestle with the place.

The novel is much better up here. When it was set in Boulder, a character having a lousy day could simply call some friends and they’d drink wine and make dinner together. Problem solved. Now my protagonists live outside Clark, South Dakota, and their nearest friends are an hour away. They have to deal with their ghosts and demons and there’s no escape into easy conviviality. It’s a much tougher novel now, and the darkness they fall into is more palpable. I’m putting the finishing touches on it right now and plan to send it to the University of Nebraska Press by the end of April.
Steven Wingate is a multi-genre author of many works including the short story collection *Wifeshopping*, the prose poem collection *Thirty-One Octets: Incantations and Meditations*, the interactive romance novel *Love at Elevation*, and the memoir *daddylabyrinth*. He received his MFA at Florida State University and now serves as associate professor of English at South Dakota State University. His novel *Of Fathers and Fire* will be released by the University of Nebraska Press in April of 2019.