



Author



Jonathan Tropper

BIO

Jonathan Tropper is the author of EVERYTHING CHANGES, THE BOOK OF JOE, which was a BookSense selection, and PLAN B. He lives with his wife, Elizabeth, and their children in Westchester, New York, where he teaches writing at Manhattanville College. HOW TO TALK TO A WIDOWER was optioned by Paramount Pictures, and EVERYTHING CHANGES and THE BOOK OF JOE are also in development as feature films.

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INTERVIEW

July 20, 2007

Jonathan Tropper is the author of PLAN B, THE BOOK OF JOE, EVERYTHING CHANGES and the newly published [HOW TO TALK TO A WIDOWER](#). In this interview with Bookreporter.com's Alexis Burling, Tropper shares the rather dark thoughts that inspired this novel and discusses its mix of humor and heavy subject matter. He also elaborates on the different facets of grief and loss his characters experience and gives his two cents on the phrase "Time heals all wounds."



Bookreporter.com: What inspired you to write HOW TO TALK TO A WIDOWER?

Jonathan Tropper: My wife and some girlfriends went on a trip to LA. That night I was out with one of the other husbands, and I had this morbid thought that if that plane went down, you'd have three widowers on the same block. So I began writing a book



about three widowers, but in the end, only Doug Parker really seemed to be working for me. So, I started from scratch and gave him the whole book.

BRC: While HOW TO TALK TO A WIDOWER is hilarious at times, the subject matter is quite dark. Did you find it difficult to blend these two emotions? People often say that humor is the best medicine for tragedy. Would you agree?

JT: Well, the humor really comes from Doug's voice, and he can't help it. Even in his darkest moments, his sarcasm is his defense mechanism of choice. So while the book itself is funny, because it's in Doug's voice, Doug himself is not laughing.

BRC: You hold nothing back when describing Doug's various stages of grief, his anger, his "irresponsible" behavior and his vulnerability. How did Doug's character affect your own emotional state?

JT: I don't think he affected me at all. I think we'd all like a free pass to be as irresponsible as Doug is, at least from time to time, to act with no regard for consequences. But, of course, none of us want the circumstances that would normally free us up to behave that way.

BRC: You write, "No one wants to believe that it's all completely random, that the direction of our lives is nothing more than a complex series of accidents, little nuclear mushroom clouds, and we're just living in the fallout." Do you agree with this sentiment, or do you believe that everything happens for a reason?

JT: I go back and forth on that, myself. But certainly, a man who has lost his wife to a seemingly senseless and random tragedy is going to find it offensive if you tell him that it happened for a reason.

BRC: At first glance, many readers might describe the Parkers as a dysfunctional family, yet in critical times they are each there for one another. What influenced you to create such a challenging dynamic for this family?

JT: I don't think the Parkers are any more or less dysfunctional than any other family. They love and resent the hell out of each other. I just made them a bit more vocal about it.

BRC: Doug's father is a fascinating character. We learn that because of his dementia, he is not lucid all the time but always seems to retain a sense of love for his family. There are other moments when his memory comes back crystal clear. How does Stanley's character contrast Doug's, who can't seem to live outside his memories?

JT: That's an interesting question. For me, Stanley's illness was

really more about Doug's mother, who is mourning the loss of her husband every bit as much as Doug is mourning the loss of his wife, but hers is a recurring loss since he's still with her every day, slipping in and out of awareness. It was meant to illustrate that there's more than one way to lose someone, and to mourn.

BRC: Doug's agent gets on his case for not wanting to promote his column in *M Magazine*, to write a memoir and to snag an Oprah interview. Why do you think Doug isn't interested in any of this? Is it that he doesn't want to capitalize on his own grief? What are your personal opinions on this issue?

JT: I think Doug is worried that any success he has from writing about Hailey's death will mean that her death was actually good for him. He's terrified of allowing something positive to come from her death, because he feels that would be a betrayal.

BRC: What does Doug Parker look like in your head? Did your image of him change from when you first began writing the book to the end?

JT: No. Doug always looked to me like a skinny guy with messy hair and a somewhat lost look in his eyes.

BRC: Do you believe in the expression "time heals all wounds"? Do you think that this is what happens to Doug?

JT: I don't think Doug is healed, not by a long shot. But over time, the other parts of your mind and body reassert themselves. You can only hold yourself in stasis for so long. Eventually, you're going to need to laugh, talk, love and touch again, even if you don't think you want to.

BRC: How would the book be different if it was set in New York City or some other large urban environment? Why the suburbs?

JT: In the city, Doug could have remained anonymous, could have disappeared into his grief and hidden from the world. In a small suburb, where everyone knows you and knows what you're going through, it's much harder to do that. Your grief is on display for all to see, which makes it that much harder to go through.

BRC: In each of your books, you have dealt with some sort of tragedy. Do you ever toy with writing a lighthearted comedy?

JT: Some would say I do write lighthearted comedies.

BRC: What are you working on now, and when might readers expect to see it?

JT: I'm quite behind on my next book. My process is to get

halfway through and then realize I hate it and start again. All I'll say is I'm writing a novel about divorce in suburbia, and so far it seems to be pretty funny.

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PAST INTERVIEW

April 2, 2004

In this interview with Carol Fitzgerald, Wiley Saichek and Bookreporter.com reviewer Brandon M. Stickney, Jonathan Tropper talks about the characters in his second novel [THE BOOK OF JOE](#) to whom he relates the most, the important themes that emerge from this story and the possible adaptation of the book into a feature film.

BRC: You capture the mixed blessings of adolescence --- as well as the environment of a small town --- perfectly in THE BOOK OF JOE. You grew up in Riverdale, New York, which is very urban. How did you come to understand small town life so well?

JT: Riverdale is actually a strange mix of urban and suburban. And while, on it's own, it doesn't seem like a small town in the classic sense, there are sub-communities built around schools or synagogues or churches that function exactly like small towns. You see familiar faces wherever you go, and in many cases you know more about them than you should, thanks to the gossip mill, and in many cases they probably know more about you than you would like. Everything you do is colored with this awareness of the audience of your community, and that is the essence of small town life. Small towns are a vital staple of popular fiction, from Stephen King to Richard Russo, and I think the reason the concept is so universal is that we all live in small towns of our own making.

BRC: Which character(s) in THE BOOK OF JOE do you identify the most with? How much --- if any --- of the book is autobiographical?

JT: THE BOOK OF JOE's story and all its characters are completely fictitious. Obviously, there are certain things Joe is going through that originate from my own storehouse of anxieties and neuroses. He's discovering as he gets older that the things he thought would fulfill him are leaving him empty, and the things he was adamant about not needing are suddenly the only things he really wants. That being said, I also relate heavily to the character of Jared, Joe's nephew, who is angry over things he can't quite articulate and wants to be regarded differently than he is, but has no idea how or why, and instead retreats into an ironic

sulk. I think a lot of him comes from my own teenage years. So Jared and Joe both have aspects of me from different times in my life, and only at this moment has it occurred to me that both of their names start with 'J', just like mine. Go figure.

BRC: Much of THE BOOK OF JOE alternates between the present-day storyline --- Joe returning to his hometown because of his father's condition --- and the "past" storyline that shares what happened when Joe was a teenager. Did you write the "flashback" scenes first or were you writing in the sequence that we are reading?

JT: It probably would have made sense to write the back story in one sitting and then break it up, but that's not how it happened for me. This story unfolded very organically, with only a flimsy outline, so while I had a basic idea of what had happened back in 1986, I only fully realized it as I wrote each flashback. However, once the book was completed, I did go back and reconfigure the flashbacks, moving some parts around where I thought they would balance out better with the events happening in the present, or to better maintain the level of suspense as the story moved forward.

BRC: THE BOOK OF JOE has a strong voice. You mastered a conversational style, which makes the reader feel as if he/she is hearing the book, rather than reading it. Have other people told you this?

JT: Yes. It's been very gratifying, actually, because I've always been very character driven, and the fact that people respond to Joe's voice means that he's coming across as a very real person.

BRC: We know that Tom Cavanagh, the star of the television show *Ed*, is the narrator on the audiobook of THE BOOK OF JOE. His voice is perfect. What did you think when you heard he was going to do this reading?

JT: Tom was actually my suggestion. *Ed* came out while I was writing THE BOOK OF JOE, and at first I was upset because it sounded so similar to my own premise that I was worried people would think of it as a knock-off. But the show had great writing, and Tom has this great delivery, ironic without any nastiness, quirky, sensitive and funny as hell when the moment demands it. I was thrilled when he agreed to do it, and he did a fantastic job. One of the most surreal moments of the whole BOOK OF JOE experience was walking into the recording studio while he was doing it and hearing my words being spoken in his voice. It sounded exactly like I pictured it would.

BRC: Peer pressure, family relationships and self-confidence are all major themes/issues in THE BOOK OF JOE. What do you want readers to take with them upon finishing the novel?

JT: I'd like them to simply think that it's never too late to make

positive changes in your life, or in yourself. It sounds kind of hokey when I say it like that, but there it is. Joe goes from being a sullen, selfish loner, a self-described asshole, to suddenly seeing the value in caring for others. We all carry around a certain degree of anger or resentment toward members of our family, and letting go of it is never easy, but infinitely rewarding. I actually heard from a sound engineer on the West Coast who worked on the audio book, and when he was done he called his father for the first time in over four years. So I think forgiveness is a big theme in this book too; seeking it and giving it.

BRC: In THE BOOK OF JOE, Joe finds himself having trouble with his second manuscript. Did you find this to be the case in your own life after your first novel, PLAN B, was published?

JT: Actually, I did take much longer with the second book. Once I'd become a published novelist, the opportunity for failure seemed that much greater. Now it was mine to lose, and what if the first time had been a fluke. Thankfully, THE BOOK OF JOE has gotten a fantastic reception in the industry, but that only serves to make me crazy with the book I'm writing now. I'll always find a reason to worry and struggle. It's the curse of every novelist, I think. If I were happy, I'd be miserable.

BRC: The relationship between Joe and his agent is an interesting one. How much does this mirror the relationship between you and your own agent?

JT: My agent is only like Owen in that he's extremely sharp and blunt. He'll tell me in a flash what he likes and hates about whatever it is I've just written, which makes him a great gauntlet to run before I show anything to the publisher. So I do count on him to tell me the truth, even when it's painful. However, we're both family men, so there's not a whole lot of wild drinking and partying going on, and all the more colorful aspects of Owen, the arrogance and debauchery, are purely fictional.

BRC: THE BOOK OF JOE has recently been optioned for film adaptation by Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston. Are there any updates you can share with us about this?

JT: Miguel Arteta (*The Good Girl*) has signed on to direct, and Doug Wright (*Quills, I Am My Own Wife*) is in the middle of writing the screenplay. I'm thrilled that Warner Brothers has attracted such immensely talented artists to the project; I think it bodes well. Beyond that, I pretty much try to stay out of their way, although I do think Tom Cavanagh would make a great Wayne and I suggested that to one of the producers.

BRC: You received a master's degree from the creative writing program at NYU. When did you begin writing?

JT: The first story I remember writing was in 4th grade, a sci-fi

thing that was a blatant rip-off of *Jason of Star Command*. In college I began writing short stories and won some contest, but never really admitted to myself or to anyone else that it was what I wanted to do. Instead I just wrote these snide little articles for the undergraduate newspaper. I wrote my first novel while I was in the NYU program, and it was pretty incoherent, but there were sections that were really good, and I saw that I could maybe make a go of it. A year or so later I was on a flight from LA to NY and saw Robert Downey, Jr., and the idea for PLAN B hit me. I wrote it in about eight months, and landed an agent a few months after that.

BRC: What writers have influenced you?

JT: Richard Russo, Jay McInerney, Brett Easton Ellis, Tom Perrotta, Tim Sandlin, Kurt Vonnegut, Joyce Carol Oates and Stephen King. In more recent years, Jonathan Lethem, Michael Chabon, Dave Eggers, Alice Sebold and Augusten Burroughs.

BRC: What are you working on now and when can readers expect to see it?

JT: I'm finishing a novel about a long absent father who attempts to reinsert himself into the dysfunctional lives of his now grown children. It's funny and sad and, I hope, ultimately uplifting. It is scheduled for Spring of 2005 from Delacorte.

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