

Michael Doane

The Crossing



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This one's for those who have overcome the darkness and let in the light when the light hurts most.

Michael Doane

Michael Doane was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1989. He studied classical literature and languages at the University of Maryland, and now lives in rural Maryland with his wife, Emily. In his spare time he hikes, travels, and reads as often as possible.

The Crossing is his debut novel.

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I

The Calling

1

Catalyst

Google said the trip would take forty-two hours on toll roads. Two thousand eight hundred and twenty-five miles in forty-two hours. Just under two days. I figured I could do it in four.

I packed a couple changes of clothes, a sleeping bag, and a week's worth of food: granola bars, bananas, water, and some iced tea. I had nine hundred dollars in my bank account.

The plan was to find rest stops along the way and sleep in the cab of my little 1995 F-150. I'd just sprawl out across the bench seat and rest easy, no problem.

My mother was the catalyst. She'd come to me a few days before I left, over breakfast.

"How are you?" she asked, like mothers do.

"Fine," I said.

There wasn't much to be said those days. Most of my friends had gone off to college or were finding themselves in bad situations. I'd been hiding myself away. Work, eat, sleep. Rinse and repeat. Avoiding reality.

"You're looking thin. You're tired."

"I'm fine, really." I didn't look up from my plate, just moved

the food around with a fork.

“Eat up.”

There was silence for a while, but I could feel her watching.

“I know it hurts. She was a good girl.”

I couldn't believe she'd bring *her* up. This was my burden to carry. It was none of her business.

“We all experience heartbreak. But we have to move on. It'll take time, darling, I know that, but just know you can talk to me.”

I looked up and glared. Held the fork tight and bit my tongue. Her eyes were piercing yet gentle.

“You don't have to hole yourself up and go through this alone.”

She couldn't understand. She'd never understand. It was insulting that she'd suggest she did. I pushed my plate forward, dropped my fork on it hard, and ran to my room. Locked the door and shut her out. I heard her calling for me but wanted none of it.

That night I began packing my things. I knew she hadn't left me for good. I knew she'd welcome me if I went to her.



The map showed a direct route up past Harrisburg, across Cleveland and Chicago, then through the Midwest. Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Idaho. I'd be in Oregon in no time. I-84 would take me straight to Portland.

Seemed simple enough. I was upset, but being on the road immediately felt freeing. I knew I was heading toward her, and that made me happy. It was a light shining through the darkness.

I'd never planned to go far from home, never even considered it a possibility. My family hardly traveled. We never had much money, and my parents weren't adventurous. We spent vacations in dumpy little places near Deep Creek Lake or Ocean City, always twenty or thirty minutes from the water.

"Three hours either way and you have everything you need." That's how my father described Maryland. "Why'd you want to go anywhere else? We got mountains in the west, the coast in the east, and we're forty-five minutes from the city."

It was all I'd ever known: *Why'd you ever want to leave?*

In those first hours on the road, I began to understand. There I was running across the US like a fool. A fool in love. For a woman who was gone.

I was exhilarated.

Six Months After

Those six months after she left were the hardest I ever endured. I worked tirelessly on my motorcycle. I don't know if it was love of the project that kept me going, or the fact that it kept me busy.

The bike was ugly when I got it—a rusty hunk of metal with hints of mustard paint still haunting the gas tank and silly rearview mirrors that floated up into the air like bug antennae. A bit of research told me it was a 1975 Honda CB 250 G.

I bought it from a friend's father, who'd let it rot away over the years among his collection of endless junk. My friend and I were out looking for alcohol in his shed when I saw it. That was in high school, but the memory stuck in my head.

Two years after graduation I finally went back to my friend and asked if his dad still had that rusty hunk of metal lying around. He did.

“Tell him I'll give him a hundred bucks for it.”

My friend laughed. “Dad's not gonna part with it. It's part of his soul.”

He was right. His father scowled at the thought of selling it. Thought a hundred bucks was a joke. “Worth at least a

thousand,” he said. I wasn’t going to challenge him. I left empty-handed.

Three days later he called me back. “Wife says to get rid of it. Forget about the cash. Just take good care of her.”

I let it sit for the first couple of months. Bought some books about motorcycle mechanics and scoured the web for tutorials. I finally decided to build it custom. I’d strip it bare, keep it light and simple. No fenders, minimal paint, low handlebars, just a frame and a motor.

Then I dove in. It consumed me. Every day I’d spend hours with her, breaking her down, building her up. Sanding and tweaking. I spent time in junkyards and got a job at a parts shop for the discount. I felt like Dr. Frankenstein, but this was no monster.

She was a thing of beauty when I got done with her. Silver, black, and brown. The gas tank a raw finish. The seat enough for one and her frame discreet with rugged elegance.

She was a far cry from what she once was. She was a powerhouse. I was a dark knight atop his muddy steed.



Maybe I neglected her. The other her. My love. Maybe she was just unhappy with herself, her place in the scheme of things. She always talked about the world outside—the kingdoms that lay in slumber waiting for her to awaken them, the crowds that would welcome her as if she were a lost princess making a long-awaited return.

“What’s out there that you don’t already have?” I’d ask. She’d look to the moon and sigh.

“It’s all the same, don’t you know? A place isn’t gonna

make you happy. You're everywhere right now. This is the world. Only the names and faces change."

She wouldn't believe it.

"There's more than all this," she'd tell me. "Life is bigger than a small town and a job. Life is more than work, eat, play. There's a whole world out there and you won't find it on the TV."

She didn't understand. She insisted on complicating things. Then my own longing came.

Six months with her gone, a year since I started the bike. I missed her and thought about her all the time. Nothing filled the void. Not even riding.

If she were the princess, I'd be her knight in shining armor. I'd go to her, save her from whatever darkness she'd found. We'd make amends and fall in love all over again. I'd take her home and she'd tell me how cruel the world was, how great it was to be back in my arms.

But how do you find someone who's erased herself? The only thing I could do was follow the trail direct, go where she'd gone.

3

Nightmares, You Might Call Them

She went to Portland. Said she might go to school or get a job in a bookstore. I didn't understand. She said it was her calling. Something was pulling her out there. She just couldn't ignore it anymore.

She cut me out—changed her number, her email address. Deleted her Facebook. She dropped off the face of the earth.

I focused on my work and finished the bike. It kept my mind off things.

I loved it. The wind in my hair, the vibration between my legs, the thrill of hairpin turns on back roads and the feeling of my heart pumping in my chest. I rode it through the hills and valleys that surrounded my quiet Maryland hometown. I felt wild and free.

But I longed for her.

I longed to know where she was, what she was doing. I had dreams—nightmares, you might call them...

She's out on a pier, deep in the ocean. A tidal wave is coming. Standing at the edge of the earth where the sand is swallowed up by the salty sea, I call for her:

“Come back! We’ve got to go! Come back!”

She doesn’t hear a word of it. She looks so peaceful out there, her arms outstretched, her flimsy dress blowing free, her hair wrapped around her face and her head held toward the sky, eyes closed, chest rising and falling, calm like an angel.

I run. I try to save her. I don’t make it.

The waves engulf her every time. The pier is eaten up and water crashes over me, softens my shoes, heavies my jeans, but I am safe. As the tide falls back into the sea, I realize she is gone.

I stand drenched, covered in sand from head to toe. Grit in my hair, my body scarred and scraped. Alone again.

“Where have you gone?” I whisper.



When I finally made it to Portland I walked the streets looking for her. I visited bookstores and coffee houses, but she was nowhere to be found. No one knew *her*.

Some recognized a name or an outfit, a style or way of speaking. But they’re all the same there. Little notes of individuality in an arpeggio of hip monotony. They preached do-what-you-wants and follow-your-longings. They hunted down their callings ceaselessly.

They thought it was cool that I’d driven cross-country in an old pickup with my motorcycle thrown in back. Said it was something they’d always wanted to do. Said it was brave and noble that I’d continued when the truck broke down in Kansas.

Eventually I exhausted my resources in Portland and headed up to Washington. I followed the jagged coast, camped the shoreline. My heart longed for her. She felt so close.

I kept on, worn down and defeated.
And that's when I found her.

II

Duke

The Mom-and-Pop Type

I woke up at a rest stop outside Cleveland, my body aching from the seat belt clasp, which had jabbed my ribs all night. It was midday and I was sweating. Eight hours of driving the day before had wiped me out.

When I left my parents' house, I was filled with anticipation and excitement. About halfway through that first day, fright crept in and overtook me. I thought about turning back but fought against it. I told myself I was a coward, that I'd never accomplish anything if I couldn't follow through.

I wanted her back so I kept on.

There's nothing like fighting for something you can't have. It keeps you going. Nothing like stubbornness and blind desire to motivate foolish actions. It's the perfect cure for uncertainty.

I lay there looking out the dusty windows. Tractor trailers, RVs, and beat-up old cars congregated at this little stop twenty miles outside the Cleveland city limits. It looked like every other place I'd ever been. It looked like the rest stop near Pittsburgh I'd stopped at the day before. It looked like Maryland. It looked like all the rest stops on the way out to

the mountains.

I saw my dad's point. If you've lived one place, you've lived a thousand.

I got up and stretched my legs outside the truck. Held my arms skyward and yawned. My head ached terribly and my back was tight. Sleeping in the truck wasn't as glamorous as I'd thought it'd be. But it wasn't so bad either. I could deal with it.

I made my way to the bathroom and relieved myself. My belly rumbled that it needed something to fill the void.

I'm convinced that even if they're generally the same, there are two main types of rest stops: those that are filled with bright signs, fast-food joints, and dime-a-dozen gas stations, and those with mom-and-pop diners and gas pumps halfway filled with water.

The workers behind the counters at the first type are always miserable. They snap you along—"Next!"—then roll their eyes and weigh you up and down with suspicion.

At the mom-and-pop type it's much friendlier. Though there's misery in the waitresses' eyes (and it always seems to be waitresses—where have all the waiters gone?), they never seem to show it any other way. They want you to feel like the center of the universe. They're counting on those tips, and they know the way to get them is to go straight for the heart.

Luckily, I was at the mom-and-pop type this time.

I sat down at a table and put my head into the menu. It read like a textbook, twelve pages of endless choices, each titled with a clever name and described with staunch rigor. I got the Philly Farmstead: a plate of home fries, toast, and cheesesteak scrambled eggs served with a side of cream cheese.

Wasn't bad. Though I'm pretty sure the cheesesteak was

made with those frozen meat slivers separated by wax paper that you can get at any grocery store. I wasn't quite sure what to do with the cream cheese so I smeared it on my toast in place of butter. The waitress seemed satisfied.

"Where you going, sweetie?" she asked as she set the check on the table.

"Portland," I said, still chewing my last bite of food.

"Portland? Maine?"

"Nah. Out west."

"Ah... What's out there?"

"Nothing." I wasn't in the mood for conversation.

She smiled and left me to my meal. "Whenever you're ready." She tapped the check twice and left me to it.

I paid and made my way back to the truck. I sat on top of the wheel well for a while, my hand and head on the seat of the bike, which was strapped tightly to the bed. I missed riding, but there was no point in taking her down till I got to Portland.

"Only a couple more days," I whispered.

I looked at all the cars passing through. All the truckers and motorists with license plates from all over the country. I wondered where they were all going. I wouldn't dare ask. I couldn't imagine anyone here was in the mood for conversation. Just a quick fill-up, maybe a nap, then on their way.

"Only a couple more days," I whispered again as I hit the road.

5

Troubles

The trouble started in Kansas. My truck began to putter and pat outside Kansas City, then I heard a terrible clunking in the engine. Sounded like a bent piston.

As I was passing through Salina, the old beast decided to give up entirely. I'd hit the gas full throttle and the engine would rev and fight for its life, that broken piston gnashing its hungry teeth, growling and snarling. Despite its best efforts, the truck would only go ten, maybe twenty, miles per hour at most.

It held out just long enough for me to pull off the highway and onto the side of the road.

I got out and stared into the engine. It was an intricate block of woven parts, some of which I recognized from their counterparts on my bike, but most completely foreign to me. There was nothing I could do.

I had a few tools but nothing that would help me with this. I remembered a scene from a book they made me read in high school—*Grapes of Wrath*. I'm not sure if I actually read the thing, but I remember the movie. After assigning a book, the teachers always seemed to show the movie. I guess they knew

most kids wouldn't read it, but they still wanted to share the story.

One scene still sticks out in my mind. The Joad family was on their way from somewhere in the Midwest, maybe even Kansas, headed for California. They broke down right in the middle of the trip. Same situation I was in. A piston got too hot and bent.

The father and son got out and walked a couple of miles to buy some parts or tools or something. The details are fuzzy. The important thing is that with the few tools they had and a bit of brute strength, they bent that piston back into place until it ran smooth.

Things sure have changed. Most mechanics couldn't do such a thing. And I sure as hell wasn't the Joad family. Definitely couldn't bend this piston back into place with five bucks and some elbow grease.

It was never part of my plan to be in Kansas. That was an unexpected leg of the journey. You might say I got a bit sidetracked...



After I left Cleveland I drove all day. Twelve hours straight. Through Indiana, past the Great Lakes, and into Chicago traffic. Worst traffic I've ever seen. Bumper-to-bumper. Ten miles took ages. Didn't help I was passing through right around rush hour.

I thought about stopping and getting a bite to eat, waiting for the mess to die down, but I wanted to stay on track. I had to get to Omaha if I was going to make it to Portland in four days. So I pulled out a granola bar and banana and let that

keep me satisfied.

Besides, I'd dropped \$150 on gas already and wanted to keep an eye on my cash flow.

By 2:00 a.m. I was beat. I hadn't made it nearly as far as I wanted and my truck was getting hot. I hadn't accounted for traffic or even thought about which times I should or shouldn't be on the road. This time I stopped at a rest area outside Des Moines, right in the heart of Iowa.

I pulled into a parking spot, plugged my phone into the charger, and turned the key back to keep the radio on so I could fall asleep to Pandora.

It was well past noon when I woke up. I stretched, found the restrooms, and walked into the cafeteria. It wasn't the mom-and-pop kind here. There weren't any friendly waitresses to strike up a conversation with—only an endless row of fast-food tellers trying to rush me into making a decision.

I wished I'd taken advantage of the opportunity to talk to the waitress the day before. The trip was starting to get lonely, and having someone pretend to care would've been a welcome relief. My doubts were getting the best of me and I needed some motivation. I thought of home, of how foolish this journey was.

I walked back and forth, checking the menus, fighting with myself about what I'd spend money on. Today, I finally decided, it would be an Egg McMuffin and some dollar-menu hash browns. I was relieved they had breakfast all day because I don't think I could've stomached a burger.

I washed it down with an orange juice then spent thirty minutes in the bathroom. That kind of food never settled right with me.

Finally it was back to the truck. I turned the ignition.

Nothing.

I pressed the gas and turned it again.

Still nothing.

Then it hit me. I had left my phone charging, the radio playing, the air blowing. The whole shebang. I'd drained her clean. Used up the battery completely. A stupid mistake. An avoidable, stupid mistake.

I slammed my palm against the steering wheel twice then punched the roof so hard it left indents. Felt my hand for broken bones and cursed the gods. I got out and searched frantically for my jumpers. *Calm down*, I told myself. *Easy enough to hook the bike up to the truck and get it going again.*

I looked in my toolbox first.

Nothing.

Then behind the seat.

Still nothing.

"Son of a bitch!"

I kicked the truck's tires as if it would somehow help.

It took a minute but I let myself breathe. I rubbed my forehead and surveyed the rest stop. All the cars coming and going. All the truckers who ran into much bigger problems. Someone was bound to have a pair of cables. It wasn't the end of the world.

I wished it had happened at the mom-and-pop stop. I would've walked back in, asked for some help, and the owner himself would've come out and given me a hand. Here it was like asking for a million bucks. The cashiers just looked at me like I had ten heads. Said they were sorry (they weren't) but they couldn't help.

I gave up on them and walked from table to table, disturbing all the weary travelers trying to enjoy their lunches in peace.

Most shoved me off with words of false regrets. Some were just plain ignorant.

Finally I came to a group of truckers laughing and carrying on, chomping down on burgers and fries.

“You guys got a jumper cable?” I said. “Battery’s dead.”

They stopped and looked at each other. Then laughed again.

“Course we got a jumper,” the big one with the beard said.

“Great!” I smiled at him. “Think you can give me a hand?”

The truckers bared their teeth. “Sure thing,” the big one said. “But what’s in it for us?”

They wanted to know what was in it for them. I’d always thought the rule of the road was to be generous where you could because you’d someday need a return on that generosity. Treat others as you’d like to be treated. Highway karma and the like.

Guess I was wrong.

“What’s in it for you? I don’t know. Guess I could give you a few bucks? Buy you a cup of coffee? I don’t have much on me. And what I got’s gotta last.”

They couldn’t contain themselves. They were all red-faced and guts busted. “How’s about a hand for a hand?” the big one said, and made a jerking movement with his fist.

I was disgusted, terrified even.

“You know... it gets lonely out there on the road.”

I was in shock.

“No thanks, I’ll find someone else.” I turned and began walking away when the group burst into laughter again.

“He’s yanking your chain!” one called after me. “Lighten up, kid. Get back over here.”

I loosened up, laughed a little. These guys were rugged. They were bored and lonely. They were a bunch of rowdy men,

and they needed their fun too.

“Fine, fine. As long as *I* don’t have to yank *his* chain.”

They were in tears. Hooting and hollering.

“Jesus kid, you clever!”

The big one let his laughter whinny down, breathed in and out, giggling his chuckles back.

“A’right, a’right. Let me get the check and I’ll meet you out by your car. Where you at?”

I pointed. “The truck with the bike in back.”

All eyes at the table lit up.

“You’re welcome to come take a look.”

6

Chasing a Dream

Ten minutes later I had a group of dirty, well-fed truckers standing around me, burping and joking, feet up on my tires, arms slung over the bed.

“Man, she’s a beaut,” one said.

“Yeah, real pretty. And you said you built her yourself?”

“Yep, completely custom,” I said.

“I’ve always been into hogs myself, so I can’t say this one does much for me,” said another.

“Yeah the cafe racer deal isn’t my thing either, but I mean c’mon, look at her. The hard work the kid put into it. More than you’ve done in twenty years. Thing looks real nice.”

“Thanks,” I said. I couldn’t keep up with the conversations, everyone talking at once. Compliment after compliment, opinion after opinion.

“Alright boys, show’s over,” the big one finally said. “This boy needs a hand and then he needs to get back on the road like the rest of us.”

The chatter died down and the crowd dispersed. Several went back to their big rigs—some fired them up and then sat with their heads in magazines and clipboards; some left

straightaway. Others lingered around my truck, admiring my handiwork and talking amongst themselves.

The big, bearded trucker pulled his tractor around and parked it in front of my vehicle. He popped the hood and asked me to pop mine.

“Where you headed?” he asked, pulling the jumpers from behind his seat.

“Out west. Portland.”

“Portland? What’s out there?”

“People keep asking me that.” I laughed. “Like they’re surprised that something’s out there. Like it’s a waste of time to go. Like it’s a fantasyland that doesn’t really exist, a dream I’m chasing.”

The trucker looked at me with skeptic’s eyes and smirked. “I’s just asking.”

I felt foolish again. This whole trip had been a jester’s journey so far, one mistake after another. I was a sideshow for everyone I met, and I was starting to feel like it was wasted time.

“So is it?” The trucker was wiring my truck to his.

“Is it what?”

He stopped what he was doing, leaned on my fender, and looked at me straight.

“Is it a fantasyland? Portland. Are you chasing a dream?”

I didn’t have an answer. I wanted to run but his gaze sucked me in.

“I don’t know.”

He bowed his head and chuckled. “Hey, that’s alright. You don’t have to know. You’re just a kid. Now get in the car and give it all you got when I shout.”

He hopped in his truck and flipped the ignition. “Alright!”

I gave the key a twist.

Nothing.

“Try again!”

Still nothing.

“One more time!”

I turned the key and held it for a moment. The engine kept turning, whining and fussing, until finally it coughed itself back to life.

The big guy walked back over to my truck.

“Alright, kid. You’re on your way.” He smiled and shut the door for me before motioning me to roll the window down.

“Hey, never stop chasing that dream. You do and you’ll end up out here, a slave to the highway, with a bunch of assholes like us. Good luck, kid.”

A Conversation Between Michael Doane, Rachel Small, and Goran “Dula” Radulovic

Rachel Small is an editor, traveler, and avid reader. *The Crossing* is one among many novels she has edited. **Goran “Dula” Radulovic** is the co-host of Between Pages Podcast with Mike and Dula.



Rachel Small: In *The Crossing*, your protagonist sets off on a journey across the United States. Did you draw on any of your own travel experiences when writing this story?

Michael Doane: This question comes up a lot, so thank you for asking it. The short answer is no. I’ve never travelled cross-country and this is not an autobiographical novel. There are, however, experiences I’ve drawn from my own travels that have made their way into the fabric of the story.

When I was ten, I took a flight to Kansas City with my father, great aunt, and great grandfather, where we rented a car and proceeded to drive to various points throughout the state. The ultimate destination was Smith Center for my great grandfather’s high school reunion. There were only about ten classmates still living. It was fascinating. The bits in *The*

Crossing that center around Kansas are certainly influenced by this trip.

My wife, Emily, and I also travel often. Our preferred mode of transportation is via car. There's something about road trips that give you time to think and have fun and turn your brain off. This pleasure has also worked its way into the narrative, although the main character is learning to enjoy the road and learn from it rather than coming to it with some sort of predetermined fondness.

Goran "Dula" Radulovic: Many books use travel to tell a story of self-discovery. Did you write this book because you consider yourself an adventurous type, or because you long to experience the type of journey described in *The Crossing*?

Doane: I think every journey we experience stretches our hearts and minds a little more. I didn't have many opportunities to travel as a child, but once I entered college a whole new world opened up to me. My wife (then-girlfriend) and I took a tour of Western Europe. It was an amazing experience and in a sense it was healing. I was going through a lot at that time and the trip really gave me a sense of calm and understanding.

Small: The protagonist works through heavy issues in his process of self-discovery. Did you intend for this work to provide hope for readers?

Doane: Absolutely. The protagonist begins at a point in time in which his best friend and lover has left him and is not coming back, most of his friends have moved on in some

way or another, and, having done little with his life, he is a twenty-something still living with his parents. He has no real prospects and I think many people, whether warranted or not, have similar feelings about their own lives. He works through his issues and comes to a place of peace. I hope readers can walk away feeling they can make the journey forward from whatever past they carry with them.

Dula: Was leaving the protagonist nameless intentional?

Doane: No, not at first. When I began writing, he kind of wrote himself that way, as if I were him, journaling about this trip. I realized I'd never given him a name about halfway through and decided there was something nice about that. This story is a personal journey — not only about him, but about the reader too. I hope leaving him nameless will allow people to step inside his shoes and vicariously give perspective to their own lives.

Small: Did the story come to you fully formed? Or did it grow and develop in ways you didn't expect?

Doane: An image came to me in a dream. I saw two people — lovers — standing on the edge of a cliff, holding hands, staring out at an erupting volcano. It was beautiful and tragic all at once, like a Thomas Cole painting. At the same time, a good friend and I were having conversations about traveling cross-country, something he's now actually planning on doing in a converted van. These things together formed the beginning and the end of *The Crossing*. Everything in between happened organically.

Writing the bones of the story was fairly quick. I actually wrote the first draft during NaNoWriMo 2014. It was very rough at that point, and I spent the next two years editing, getting feedback from beta readers, working with my developmental editor, Rebecca Faith Heyman, and of course, working with you, Rachel, on the final round of edits.

Small: Are the relationships the main character has with others influenced by relationships in your own life? I'm interested in Duke in particular.

Doane: Sure. Many of the characters in *The Crossing* draw their personality traits from people I know or have known in my life. Duke is a very interesting example. There was a time in the middle part of high school that I put myself around unsavory characters. I had my fair share of being left high and dry. Duke was certainly influenced by those people.

Duke is also an amalgamation of personas like S. E. Hinton's Tex, and famous musicians like Bob Dylan and Townes Van Zandt. Dylan, being a city boy feigning country, and Van Zandt, who was from a wealthy and prominent Texan family, kind of presented themselves as something they weren't. I think this is part of Duke's main appeal. You're not quite sure who or what he is, but he's got this charisma you can't deny.

Dula: Speaking of Duke, can we expect a spin-off novel with Duke as the main character?

Doane: This is the second most popular question I get. We never learn about Duke's backstory, or his relationship with Aubrey. There's lots of potential there. He also mentions

a desire to write an album called *Starry Nights*. Nothing's planned, but we'll see.

Small: Mountains are quite significant throughout the story. Do they hold special meaning for you?

Doane: A couple years ago I walked the Maryland section of the Appalachian Trail in a weekend. Fifty miles in forty-eight hours. The ups and downs — geographically, physically, and emotionally — I experienced on that short trip were amazing. I also walk a trail near my house often. It is mostly flat, but there is a particular section that zigzags up a large, steep hill. That section is what I look forward to on every hike. Sometimes I struggle up it, sometimes I run up it, sometimes I pace myself and enjoy the challenge.

I think mountains represent journeys well. And they represent life. They can be challenging to climb, they can be beautiful, sometimes they even explode unexpectedly and throw everything off balance. But we have to learn to enjoy them for what they are and experience the challenges and joys as they come.

Dula: Do you consider yourself to be a genre-based writer or is your spectrum wider than that? Will you be writing any more travel stories?

Doane: The genre discussion is a tough one for me. *The Crossing* is only my first published novel and, to be honest, I'm not sure I've found my niche quite yet. I've written two other novels, one of which does involve travel and coming-of-age themes. The best thing I can do for my readers and myself is

to continue writing what I love, what interests me, and what I am passionate about. If it fits into a certain genre, so be it.

Small: What works have influenced you as a writer?

Doane: This is a tough question to answer too because I am constantly being influenced by the books I read. J. K. Rowling, as I suspect any writer my age would answer, had a profound influence on me. T. H. White's study of the human psyche through King Arthur is also important. Steinbeck and Borges are two others for whom I have a deep admiration.

The Crossing in particular was influenced by Homer's *Odyssey* first and foremost. *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho and *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse were important as well. I hadn't read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* or *On the Road* until I was well into editing the final draft, but I'd like to think of *The Crossing* as a spiritual successor to these, and it was certainly influenced by the idea and tradition of the American travel story. Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* and Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* also had some sort of sway on the book.

Small: What's next for you?

Doane: There's potential for a sequel or spin-off of *The Crossing* if enough people seem interested. I have two other drafts I have to tend to as well. We'll see.



For more information about Michael Doane, Between Pages Podcast, and *The Crossing* visit www.medoane.com.