

## Don Lee on *Country of Origin*

Author Interviews / By Robert Birnbaum / November 16, 2004 / 30 minutes of reading



Long-time *Ploughshares* editor [Don Lee](#) has recently published his second book, a novel entitled *Country of Origin*. His first book, a story collection called *Yellow*, was highly regarded and garnered a Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from The Academy of Arts and Letters. Don Lee lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts and continues to ply his craft. This is my second conversation with him.



*Country of Origin* is set in Tokyo in 1980 as the United States--and indeed the world--watches the Iran hostage crisis and coming presidential election unfold. Three characters: Liz Countryman, a bi-racial American; Tom Hurley, a junior diplomat and a half Korean; and Kenzo Ota, a schlumpy Japanese detective, become intertwined in a suspenseful story both culturally illuminating and psychologically haunting. As Tess Hadley observed in the *New York Times*, "It has all the right ingredients for a thriller: a missing girl, a variety of suspects, two men on the case, entanglements in high places and a tour through some of the more bizarre aspects of the Tokyo sex trade. It's a good idea structurally, too, that the account of Lisa's months in Japan leading up to her disappearance is woven into the narrative of the search for her; this takes us into some fascinating locales and also underscores our urgent need to find out what has happened to her." In the end, *Country of Origin* centers on the preeminent theme in Lee's fiction, the plight of displacement in the modern world. And as you will read below, that is something Don Lee knows about.

**Robert Birnbaum:** What does it say about W.W. Norton, your publisher, that in short order they have published [Vyvayne Loh](#)'s *Breaking the Tongue*, and Lan Samantha Chang's *Inheritance* and your book, *Country of Origin*, in the same season?

**Don Lee:** All first novels.

**RB:** Yes.

**DL:** First, you have to laud them. They appreciate Asian-American writers and are not afraid to group them all together in one season. I'm sure they had some hesitation about it at their sales and marketing meetings--"Are we going to look like we are the Asian-American arm of U.S. publishing or something?"

**RB:** [laughs]

**DL:** I am also fairly certain that they were worried about grouping them all together and getting group reviews, which hasn't happened. But they actually have five first novels in their catalogue for this season, spring & summer, which is unusual. It says a lot about them, and kudos to them for being an independent publisher and being able to do that.

**RB:** Did they know what they were doing? But of course they did.

**DL:** I think they did try to spread us out a little bit. As they probably should have been worried that we would be pigeonholed together. But maybe the media has become a little more savvy in the three years since I published my book. When I published my first book there were two other writers who had first collections out, Christina Chui and Laura Glen Lui. And we got a lot of group reviews. They were from different publishers and the books were very different.

**RB:** The three books we are talking about are not at all alike. A group review would be a contrivance.

**DL:** So it has gotten better in that sense. We are not getting grouped together.

**RB:** Chang Rae Lee's book *Aloft* came out in March and was very well reviewed. Did it sell?

**DL:** It was on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for several weeks, which, these days, doesn't mean a whole hell of a lot. But still I think it did very well. He's broken through to the mainstream of literary readers and--

**RB:** That's a big group.

**DL:** [both laugh] Maybe 100,000 at most these days. [laughter continues] I reviewed that book for the *Boston Globe*. What I said about it was that for sure a lot of people were really shocked that he had this main character, the first-person narrator who was 59 years old, white and middle class and living in suburban Long Island. And I am certain that he was a little afraid that there would be some sort of backlash from someone saying, "You have betrayed your heritage, or your roots, or your responsibility to Asian-American writers." It was very brave of him, almost revolutionary in a way because it paved the way for other writers, other Asian-American writers, and we could do pretty much anything that we wanted to, that we didn't have to write from the viewpoint of an Asian-American all the time and that we could venture out into other characters and other points of view. But there was a backlash.

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**RB:** How brave was it for the *Globe* to ask you to review *Aloft*? Most of the reviews I noticed were not by Asian-Americans.

**DL:** I actually asked to review that book. With the book reviews I do, in general I only review books that I like. I don't feel that it's necessary to give a bad review to someone. In these days of publishing, if you don't review it, it's not going to sell. The absence of a review is just as loud as giving a negative review. I loved his [Lee's] first two books. I said, "I would like to take a look at this one, and if I don't like it I'll tell you." I feel comfortable doing that. Especially after *A Gesture Life*, his second book, I thought he was really doing interesting things and [I] wanted to take a look at the third book. You are right, usually newspapers lacking some imagination, perhaps, always try to find someone who has written a similar book or has a similar ethnic background to review that writer. I haven't seen it so much for him, and I didn't see that so much for me, either.

**RB:** As much as I pay attention, I get a sense that your book has been well reviewed.

**DL:** Actually, it's gotten mixed reviews.

**RB:** I don't mean the quality of the reviews. I mean the amount of reviews.

**DL:** A lot of reviews--it has. My publisher has been happy about that and surprised, maybe, because this year, this summer in particular, novels haven't been reviewed. There are quite a number of my peers whose--even people's third books when their first and second have done very well and they haven't gotten reviews. I've been shocked by that.

**RB:** What's the explanation for that?

**DL:** I have a feeling that since 9/11 things have changed. It's really given over to nonfiction more than fiction in terms of the reviewing media's sense of importance. When you do have things like [Bill Clinton's] *My Life* and Richard Clarke's book coming out, certainly they feel the need to give that a lot of play, as well they should. But when the pages have been shrinking for book reviews, overall...

**RB:** Well, which is more the problem.

**DL:** Yeah.

**RB:** There are always books like the Clinton bio, or something topical like Clarke's book or Seymour Hersch's book, to compete. But would people normally pay attention to Nial Ferguson or Chalmers Johnson? I followed Charles McGrath's long goodbye at the *Times Book Review* and the attendant issues, more fiction or less--

**DL:** Or cover more commercial fiction?

**RB:** The discussions go on, and people rage and fume about it, but there is the irony that most of the people who take issue with the *Book Review* don't need it to be aware of the books that it is or isn't reviewing. So what is the point? The *New York Times Book Review* is not making a cultural contribution with their reviews.

**DL:** It matters to other newspapers about whether they'll run a review or not. But it's also just to book sellers, whether they are going to put it on the table featured face out, on the shelves, that sort of thing. A good *New York Times* book review will do wonders for you.

**RB:** I just read that a good *Times* review doesn't do much if you are an established writer, but it does a lot for a new author.

**DL:** Right.

**RB:** It's a shame we spend this time fulminating on these things. [both laugh] What does it have to do with telling stories? [laughter continues]

**DL:** In that sense, you can talk about the entire business of going on tour. First of all, I had a very different sense going on tour this time than I did with my first book. [For] my first book I did four readings in four different cities. I did a few interviews here and there. But they were all spaced out over three or four months. And it was a pretty leisurely pace. But this time around, it was compacted. My tour was nine days, five cities, eight readings, 13 interviews, three store signings.

**RB:** [laughs]

**DL:** I tallied it all up. I was wondering why I was so exhausted. But I got the sense that you had to do it in three weeks. The reviews had to be clustered, the interviews and everything else, and if you didn't make it in that three weeks the book was dead. I don't know if that is imagined or not. My publisher says no, you have a longer life span--

**RB:** Yeah, six weeks.

**DL:** The differences in those three years? Computers. Bookscan. The way that Barnes & Noble and Borders order their books and keep them or return them. They can see the movement of sales or the lack thereof and either order more or start returning them. So the shelf life has really shrunk.

**RB:** The trick is to go to as many cities as possible, sign as many books as possible and then the stores can't return them.

**DL:** No, that's changed. They can. That changed a long time ago. They can return signed books. So you going and signing thirty or forty books, it doesn't matter. [both laugh]

**RB:** Oh well.

**DL:** It's a crazy business. How many businesses still run on this consignment system where they can return things?

**RB:** I think the record business.

**DL:** I don't know about that.

**RB:** It did. I don't know if it still does.

**DL:** I went to a reading with Robert Olen Butler--he read with Sam Chang and he told me that he was going on a 45-city tour. The publisher initially said 15 cities and he said, "Do more. Do more." This is his 10th book. He feels that this is the only way to make sure that book has a life-- he has to keep on going out there. And keep trying to get as many interviews as possible.

**RB:** Authors as carny people and pitchmen.

**DL:** Yeah. But it's a crazy notion. You have writers who go into writing because they are sensitive and introspective [both laugh] and inwardly drawn and a bit reclusive and curmudgeonly. And then suddenly there are expected to sell themselves. Sometimes you go out and you do things like one interview I did, the guy said, "Let's just do 7 or 8 minutes." And he starts: "So we have here Don Lee, author of *Country of Origin*. I lived in the U.S. all my life, so I can't imagine what it would be like to immigrate to the U.S. and write a book about it. So tell us about it, Don?"

**RB:** [laughs heartily]

**DL:** And I just rolled with it. I corrected him and said, "No, it's a novel," and told what it was about. We actually had some chuckles. He was a nice enough guy but he hadn't bothered to read the book. He hadn't read the press release. But you just roll with it and you do these kinds of interviews, but the sum of it is that you finish the tour and being nice to everyone as much as possible, you feel a little bit like a whore.

**RB:** Ah yes, the euphemism employed for a while was charm initiative. It certainly is the way of the world which has been accelerating in my perception since the early '90s--this book tour thing. It seems to have exploded. It seems to be obligatory, and I don't think the writers I have talked to [it is of course skewed to people who do them] who don't feel obliged to their publisher.

**DL:** This year it's changed a little bit. Publishers are more reluctant to put their authors on tour. Authors are having to ask. One example is Tom Perotta. They hadn't planned to send him on tour, even after he got that front page rave on the [*New York Times*] *Book Review*. The only readings he did were in New York and here. My editor once said to me very frankly, "Well, we know that readings don't sell books. You go somewhere cross-country and you sell 10 copies--that doesn't pay for the expenses [obviously]. What we hope for is that when we send you to these cities that you are going to get a feature review or interview or a radio or TV interview." That's what they are looking for. But knowing that that's happening less and less, I think they are more reluctant to send you out.

**RB:** I consider myself in some very lucky that I live in this area and there are 5 or 6 writers passing through every

week. It's hard to tell from my end of it that there has been a slow down. Although it's odd the people that aren't sent here. When you first walked in, you mentioned to me that your agent has been hinting [both laugh] about future work. And I was thinking as I was driving in from New Hampshire about you and about the task, and wondering about the level of pressure is there now? Writing seems to be a thing one does off the clock, out of time. And then--

**DL:** It's a sideline. It's not my main job. I still work full time at *Ploughshares*. What I did with the novel was that a couple of years ago I negotiated with Emerson College so I could take Fridays off. And so I wrote the novel on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. But it is difficult; I wish I had the sort of job that where I at least had the summer off. And could concentrate a little more--the way I was able to write the novel is because I don't have children.

**RB:** [laughs]

**DL:** I don't know how writers who have children are able to do it, to produce anything.

**RB:** There's an idea for an anthology. I just saw one today, a collection of stories by writers who live with other writers. So the next one will be *Writing With Children*.

**DL:** Right. When I came out with *Yellow*--actually when I was trying to sell *Yellow* I was talking to agents, and I said, "I am actually looking for a one-book deal." Because I was thinking that these are stories that I had written over the course of 10 years. And it had always been a hobby. I was an editor first and a writer second. And I didn't know whether I was going write a second book or not. I couldn't get a one-book deal. It was the two-book deal with the novel.

**RB:** Had it been a one-book deal, what would have happened with writing a novel?

**DL:** I probably wouldn't have done it. It would have taken me years. It might have taken ten years to get around to it.

**RB:** The time factor aside, is it hard for you to write? I suppose it cuts into your windsurfing.

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**DL:** [laughs] Well, I get as many days as I can. I pissed and moaned about writing this novel the entire way through.

**RB:** [laughs]

**DL:** With my friends I kept on referring to it as the TFN, the fucking novel. But in retrospect, it really wasn't that

hard. I was able to discipline myself so that--one decision that I made was if I was going to write this in any kind of reasonable amount of time, I had to make it a plot-driven book. It was the first novel I had ever attempted. And I knew I could get bogged down and it would take me eight or ten years or something if I didn't have it really relying on story. So that was a deliberate choice, to make it a quasi mystery or play with the mystery genre. That made it a lot easier for me. I was able to switch it on and off, so come Friday morning I was at my desk and was able to write. Granted it would take me--my objective was to write two chapters a month, and to write the 1st draft in one year, which I did. But granted it would take me the entire 8 hours of the day to write 2 damn pages [both laugh] where I would be sitting there constantly getting up and taking naps or checking e-mail. All of these sorts of things--you play all kinds of tricks on yourself to get yourself to write. So what I did was write the entire thing in long hand. And made myself not revise until I got to the end. And I would just keep on going. At the end of the year, I had 20 legal pads.

**RB:** Would you do it that way again? Is that now your methodology?

**DL:** It seems to be.

**RB:** And thus the next one that you may or may not write will not be as foreboding to you?

**DL:** I don't think I am ever going get rid of that anxiety. You are at the end of a project, and you immediately think, "I am never going be able to write another thing." After this year I have written a couple of short stories just to prove to myself that I am still capable of writing a short story. Now I am starting to gather ideas for a new novel, and I still think whether I will be able to do this.

**RB:** Do you think non-writers understand that fear?

**DL:** No.

**RB:** You've written a book of short stories and now a novel. You have been an editor. It all points to the fact that you can continue to do this to write fiction.

**DL:** Right. The second book syndrome, let's approach that for a start. I understand that completely. What it's about is the imposter syndrome. It's this fear that you are going to be found to be a fraud. That the first book was a complete fluke. Or else you blew your wad with that first book and nothing is there, the well is empty. It's more so that you are afraid whatever you had was in that first book, and it was overpraised, and you are going to be found out to have no talent whatsoever.

**RB:** Is there ever a hum of pleasure and equanimity--you are so engrossed in the task that you forget all these fears? Do you remember that? [laughs]

**DL:** You do at moments. The question becomes then, why do you do it? The pleasure then becomes the things that--regardless of how meticulous you are in plotting a book, things pop up that you hadn't expected. And these

are the pleasures. Or else you think of a phrase or sentence or a paragraph that you think is pretty good, and so those are the pleasures of writing. The anxiety is there throughout, wondering if you are going to be able to finish. And whether it's all going to fall apart. I heard Michael Cunningham say that there is always a point in writing a novel when you realize you have missed a fundamental flaw and that everything falls apart and you have to start over. I just kept on waiting for that, wondering what I missed that's really obvious and that is suddenly going to make me have to start all over again. Or abandon this. You hear that all the time about people who are hundred fifty, two hundred pages into it and then they realize that it can't work.

**RB:** [Kent Haruf](#) told me he finished *Eventide* and was driving to California with his wife. She was reading it to him aloud, and he couldn't stand it. And instead of visiting with his kids, he took a motel room and rewrote it.

**DL:** [Charles Baxter](#) came to a point in writing *The Feast of Love* where he was sitting down with his wife at dinner and he said, "You know, I think I am going to give up on this book. I don't know where it's going to go and it's not working." And he almost did. So no, that anxiety never leaves. And why we do it? It's very simple. You are compelled to do it. Despite your neuroses and your insecurities and everything else, you have these images floating in your head that you need to vent, that you need to write down. I think that's what it is. The other pleasure about writing a novel is that it's like an intellectual exercise. There is this jig saw of these images that are floating around and then connecting the dots, laying down so that they start to make a shape. That's a wonderful feeling when it starts to make sense to you and then you start to tie things together.

**RB:** So how do you feel about *Country of Origin*?

**DL:** I think it's the best book I could have written at the time. I was telling Anne Beattie that if I were to write this book now it would probably be 200 pages longer. I would fill in the characters more; I would have more of a robust narrative. And I would not have it rely so much on the plot. She said, "Oh God, who needs another 200 pages?" She thought the pace was fine for the type of book I was doing.

**RB:** As a reader I found the characters sufficiently interesting. It was a mixed bag of odd people with peculiar flaws. I suppose you could have filled them in, but they didn't seem incomplete.

**DL:** It was really that much of a departure from the first book.

**RB:** You got some references to Rosarita Bay in.

**DL:** Some of it was based on "Domo Arigato" which was in *Yellow* and a couple of characters from that showed up in *Country of Origin*. If I were to do it all over again, I would first of all never set it in Tokyo.

**RB:** Because?

**DL:** I lived in Tokyo when I was in high school from 14 to 18 years old 1974 to 1978. And I figured I wouldn't need to do a lot of research. I was completely wrong. It was just stupid and inane for me to think that. What did I know

about living in Tokyo as an adult? What did I really know about working in the embassy? Nothing! I needed up to do a tremendous amount of research.

**RB:** If you had place to embassy in Baghdad or Istanbul, would you have had to do less research?

**DL:** I would have been better to have better sense of a city where I lived now. The problem is that much like the characters in the book, I have never had a real home. We shuttled back and forth from army bases and embassy compounds. We had borrowed government-issued furniture. We had one house in northern Virginia when I was 13 and we stayed there for a year. My dad was away for nine months out of that year. My mom and I fixed up this house and bought all the furniture and everything, and then we got 30 days notice that we were moving to Tokyo. That furniture went in to storage and it stayed in storage, for 20 years, and then when my dad retired, storage came in from three different places in these crates kept in climate controlled warehouses, and they were in perfect shape, but there was this [laughs] '70s furniture. So I don't have this sense of home. Whereas some one might write about their place of origin, I don't have that.

**RB:** You do have a sense of displaced people.

**DL:** Which is what I always write about.

**RB:** [both laugh]

**DL:** My shrink had an incredibly astute comment--

**RB:** She better. Or he better.

**DL:** Well, you always feel like an outsider. That has become how you have survived and even maybe excelled. Your dysfunction had become your function. I think that is true. It's given me something to write about. [laughs] It's a persistent theme in my work.

**RB:** That's provides a level of comfort, doesn't it? Knowing your vantage point in life.

**DL:** Yes it does.

**RB:** Whose genius idea was it to have guest editors at *Ploughshares*?

**DL:** It came about by accident. It came about because they agreed to disagree. When Dewitt Henry and Peter O'Malley started this journal back in '71 at the Plough and Stars (where I live right across the street right now).

**RB:** I spent the nights of my first years in this area there.

**DL:** But they couldn't agree on who would be the editor. And so they thought, "We'll take turns." They hated each

other's tastes so much so they took turns. And then Frank Bidart was the first one they invited from outside the circle and then it started going farther and farther away in those circles people that they would invite. Now mostly what we like to do is get people who have had their early work in *Ploughshares* a long time ago and have established themselves and now want to give something back. It's hard to convince people to do it. It takes a lot of time. We don't pay a lot. And even though they have that sense of community service, they know that it's going take away from their own work.

**RB:** I thought [Amy Bloom's introduction](#) in the edition she edited was pitch perfect and thrilling in a way that drove me into the new edition. Normally I would look at the Table of Contents and put it aside for a moment [both laugh]. But I read her piece and got right into it. It was a great explanation of the place of these small magazines in our culture. So there I am staring at the new *Ploughshares* and the new *McSweeney's* and the new *Glimmertrain* and the new *Believer* and the *Paris Review*—

**DL:** Well, there are something like 600 established literary magazines in the country, which means that they come out on a somewhat regular basis. But maybe ten of them have circulation above 3,000. And the rest of them below 500. The last count was that there are maybe 6000 journals and zines that come out on an irregular basis, but they come and go. We have seen recently a lot of the bigger kind of institutions being shut down because mostly the editor who started these journals in the '70s is retiring. Or even longer-- *The Partisan Review* has been much talked about, *The Ohio Review's* Wayne Dodd is retiring, and we will probably continue to see that. But it seems to be a naturally regenerative process. New ones are coming up all the time, and it's cheaper to put out a journal now. In terms of the typesetting and the printing, costs have stayed at a reasonable level. But because everything is computerized, it's easier to do.

**RB:** And there is the online world, which has no printing costs.

**DL:** I think it's a good process for things to die and new ones to come up.

**RB:** As opposed to the underlying angst that it's all disappearing.

**DL:** No, it's not disappearing. In the coming years, in the next ten years, we'll see a larger turnover. More of the so-called venerable magazines will start to close. People will be alarmist about that, but new ones will always pop up. And they will be pretty invigorating and fresh.

**RB:** I find it interesting the kind of proprietary attitude that comes out when there is commentary on the slush pile at *The New Yorker* or the editor of *The New York Times Book Review* retires. Now that [Frank Conroy](#) is retiring at Iowa, I wonder if there will be any to do about his successor--which should affect who? Maybe the 700 people who apply every year. It's now an Associated Press story. It's interesting that this is news.

**DL:** Maybe there is this general worry about the fate of literary works. Everyone is talking about that NEA survey (only 47% of the country read a book, a story, a play or a novel in one year). It's just an astounding thing. How

alarming it was that the numbers were dwindling at an accelerated pace in most recent years --and that numbers showed that younger people were reading less. Being distracted by technology--the Internet and cable TV, video games and everything else. People are worried about that and they have a good reason to be. The fascinating thing is, of course, that the [number of] people who want to write seems to be increasing all the time. There has been no let up of that at all.

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You have writers who go into writing because they are sensitive and introspective and inwardly drawn and a bit reclusive and curmudgeonly. And then suddenly they are expected to sell themselves.

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**RB:** Odd, isn't it? They'll end up writing for themselves.

**DL:** Every single literary magazine editor has the same lament--which is, "I wish we had the same number of subscribers as submitters." We have a total circulation of six thousand but we get over 1200 submissions a month. It's an astounding number, and you go to these writers' conferences and it seems to me that every time I go out there in the public, the people in the audience all want to be writers. Even the booksellers, the people who would introduce me at readings. They want to be writers, too.

**RB:** What is at the root of this narrative obsession?

**DL:** You would hope that people would be interested in the form and think there is value in the form and that it is integral to the cultural health of the country. So that's what you hope for, but I have this suspicion that there is something about the pursuit of celebrity that plagues every person in this society--maybe it all started in the '80s with the Brat Pack [Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInnerny], writers appearing in gossip magazines. But there is this sense that you can become a star, overnight. That's certainly a possibility. It's not a big possibility. But there is a real possibility of that if it is your first novel and that's where you can make the most money, no.

**RB:** With these unreal advances being handed out?

**DL:** Yeah. People who have a first book--I don't think there has been a slow down in publishers' interests for them--where there has been a drop off is in a writer's 3rd and 4th books. That's because of computers and Bookscan. Everyone can look up your sales figures for your last book, or they can plug in and say, "Find me something similar to this, did that sell?"

**RB:** So there are no 30-year-old, mid-list writers?

**DL:** [both laugh] It's harder and harder now.

**RB:** Right. The pressure to deliver a bestseller sooner has become pre-eminent. Could you have imagined that there would be coaches for young authors going out on tour on how to do TV interviews?

**DL:** Right, right.

**RB:** Is [Marian Ettliger](#) the new Cecil Beaton or Karsh? Apparently a sign of arriving is to have her do your author portrait. The celebrity engine is like a pinball machine.

**DL:** On the other side of that, though--we were talking about blogs before--if you look at these blogs people still care passionately about good books and good writing. So that still does exist. That's the hope of it. The conclusion of Dana Gioia and the NEA and in many ways it was a scare tactic, was in 50 years if we keep on going at this rate, reading will no longer be a measurable activity. I don't think that will be the case. People will always care about books and writing. It might be a smaller group, but it will always exist.

**RB:** Pop culture seems noisier and relentless.

**DL:** If you were able to sit at *Ploughshares*, at my desk, you would see that the writing, the things we get, seem to be getting better and better. We can't print everything we receive that is worthy of being published. Going back to institutional magazines and the big wigs, the question will be whether universities will continue giving support to literary magazines at the same level that they have. There is more pressure, not to be profitable because none of these are profitable or even break even, but just to lessen the burden on the institution.

**RB:** There has been anxious talk about the state of university presses also.

**DL:** Right, and their importance, because whether you get tenure depends on whether you publish and if there is no place to publish, what do you do? There was this suggestion that they pool money together, [laughs] which I don't think would work.

**RB:** Sounds socialistic. We don't do that in this country, do we? I wonder about the NEA survey's question. It seems to be a regular sport to issue these studies proclaiming how ignorant we are, "No high school students could find the U.S.A. on a world map!" and such.

**DL:** Isn't it true that every two years there is some sort of report that comes out that says nobody is reading anymore? And still they are publishing more books than ever. I am sure in five years a report will come out that now that baby boomers are now retiring, more people are reading than ever, because that sort of activity has been ingrained in that generation, and now that they are not working they have more time to read. I am certain that will happen.

**RB:** You think?

**DL:** Hopefully.

**RB:** In addition to the noise level, there is that state-mandated, media-driven consumerism. The baby boomers, the leading edge of that with their Hummers and plasma TVs and large discretionary income, will not retire from

shopping, for sure.

**DL:** [laughs] You can also talk about the sea change in that books are treated like product launches now. And you have to keep those shelves new all the time. Every week you [bookstores] have to change the table, have to change the shelves. That's led to the quicker returns. And also more books as well.

**RB:** The blockbuster mentality is operative.

**DL:** Yeah, as many hits as possible and maybe one of them will turn out to be the blockbuster.

**RB:** I was looking at an AOL front page and the copy line said something like, "Don't be the last one on your block to buy Harry Potter." Pretty dumb. We have been hither and dither--you mentioned a next novel and some stories.

**DL:** The idea is that fictional town in *Yellow*, Rosarita Bay. I am thinking of going back there.

**RB:** Like William Kennedy.

**DL:** Yeah. [laughs] Or Faulkner, grandiosely I say. I always liked the idea of this town being a place of exile. It's a bit of seedy backwater and people have, whether by choice or they have been forced to stay there out of the limelight.

**RB:** This is consistent with your own personal experience.

**DL:** This is my imaginary hometown, maybe. But I have this idea of two brothers and one of them is an artist that chose to drop out of the art world a long time ago and has been living in this town working as a welder--he used to be sculptor--and maybe there is a family farm involved with Brussels sprouts and artichokes. I haven't decided yet. But his younger brother comes in, and the vague thought is that he is representing some sort of development group and it's the onslaught of modernity into this town and whether it can be stopped or not. It's mostly about obsolescence and disgrace--all the things we have been talking about here.

**RB:** [both laugh] So this is not particularly plot driven.

**DL:** I have a little more confidence that I don't have to rely so much on plot. This will still have some plot, some sort of traditional lines of drama and maybe melodrama. Probably will rely more on characters. More like the stories.

**RB:** Any talk of a movie deal for *Country of Origin*?

**DL:** There has been a couple of people--

**RB:** No doubt they want to change the races of the characters--

**DL:** And the location [both laugh heartily]. My agent and I have said if you want to do that, just show us the money. I don't think it's a movie that will ever be made because it would be way too expensive, and certainly the characters, in terms of the way Hollywood thinks demographically, would be pointed to such a small percentage of the population. But it would be nice if someone optioned it. [chuckles]

**RB:** Of course. How long have you been editing *Ploughshares*?

**DL:** 16 years.

**RB:** And counting. And writing and windsurfing. Anything going to change in your life?

**DL:** Well I have been thinking about it a lot. In the next couple of years I would like to find a full time teaching job. It's something I did when I graduated with my MFA. But I taught it as an adjunct dog. No benefits, no contract, semester to semester. I loved teaching when I did it. I thought of it as a calling. Now when I go and visit campuses, it's energizing to be around younger people. I would really enjoy that. So that's the change that I am going to make. I can't see doing *Ploughshares* for 20 more years. I know I am always going to be the kind of writer who is going to have to have a full-time job. That's the reality of publishing these days. So do I continue being an editor, or do I do something else, and so I could be ready for a change soon.

**RB:** Well, good. Thanks.

**DL:** Thank you.

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### About The Author

#### Robert Birnbaum

Robert Birnbaum's Social Security number ends in 2247. He lives in zip code 02465 and area code 617. He was born in the 2nd month of a year in the 20th century. He doesn't social network (used as a verb) except through his Cuban retriever Beny (named after Beny More, the Frank Sinatra of Cuba). Izzy Birnbaum also has cloud storage and uses electronic mail. He hopes his son Cuba is the second coming of Pudge Rodriguez. He mutters to himself at [Our Man In Boston](#). E-mail: [duendepublishing@gmail.com](mailto:duendepublishing@gmail.com)

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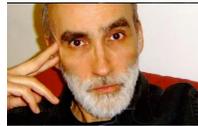
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