

CULTURE

DON LEE'S LONELY HEARTS CLUB

By JEFF VASISHTA

Published 06/05/17

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In Don Lee's new novel, *Lonesome Lies Before Us* (W. W. Norton & Company), Yadin Park, a former alt-country singer/songwriter cobbles together a meagre existence in a down-on-its-heels Northern Californian beach town. Working as a carpet installer, Park is in a long-term relationship with his boss's daughter, Jeanette Matsuda. Once a photographer and now a hotel cleaner, Matsuda also bears the scars of abandoned dreams and as a couple, the two stitch together a threadbare, aging hippy kind of life. Then, Yadin's old flame, the fading country music star Mallory Wicks, reappears.

Do not let the unassuming nature of these characters fool you: *Lonesome Lies Before Us* is a tale of heartbreak, love, and failure that will keep sounding in your head long after final page.

Currently a professor at Temple University's MFA program, Don Lee's previous work includes the short story collection *Yellow* (2001), as well as the novels *Country of Origin* (2005), *Wrack and Ruin* (2008), and *The Collective* (2012). A former long-time editor of the literary journal *Ploughshares*, Lee has received numerous awards such as an O. Henry Award, a Pushcart Prize and the Fred R. Brown Literary Award.

JEFF VASISHTA: Depicting the unraveling lives of everyday people struggling to get by is not easily done. It's not sexy or glamorous, but you make these middle-aged characters compelling in a sad, endearing way. What made you choose them?

DON LEE: I was interested in portraying working-class characters who are nearing midlife, when they can't exactly start anew, particularly in the wake of the great recession. I'm fascinated in general by people's jobs and what they do on a day-to-day basis. I came to think that in order to pay homage to these rather ordinary people, I had to make the novel an anti-drama of sorts—a quiet, straightforward book, with no pyrotechnics, gimmicks, or flashy scenarios—yet



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prove that these people's lives could still be full of yearning and dreams and heartbreak.

VASISHTA: When Joe, Jeanette's father, tells her that there's nothing worse than growing old alone it seems that it's part of the reason Yadin and Jeanette are together. They don't want to be lonely, even though they're both after something more. It seems the reason many middle-aged couples are together.

LEE: A lot of couples, I think, end up together by default, thinking they don't have any other options. Their partner might not be the person they really desire, yet it's preferable to being alone. That's the compromise that Yadin and Jeanette face, and the question in the novel is whether it's enough for them—or for anyone.

VASISHTA: You go into extreme detail in this novel on number of things—hearing loss and Yadin's illness, the inner workings of a hotel housekeeper's job, and the life of a struggling musician who only records on old, outdated equipment—all with great authenticity. Did the story come first or did you have a rough idea in your head and then the research made the story fit together?

LEE: I tend to go into too much detail about such stuff, probably, but that's always been part of my fiction, incorporating a lot of research. Plus, research is a great way to procrastinate from actually writing. The story came first in this particular book, but I got to know the characters by researching the nitty-gritty aspects of what's preoccupying them: their jobs, hobbies, obsessions. I loved discovering all the minutiae about recording and guitars, Martins in particular. For example, I heard Jason Isbell talk about his custom D-35, and how, like all guitars, the more you play it, the better it sounds. Sometimes he'll place it in front of a speaker before he leaves the house and put on Outkast or the like and crank the bass. The more the spruce top on the guitar vibrates, the better it'll sound when playing it.

VASISHTA: Yadin always seems in search of something deeper and more profound with which to guide him. He toys with religion, but his true religion, I think, is his creativity.

LEE: You're spot-on there. He turns to religion to find an inner spirituality that will sustain him after his world goes silent, after he loses his hearing. In my first draft, I had a throwaway line that he and Jeanette are in a choir together at a Unitarian Universalist church. I thought Yadin's longing for grace and salvation could be explored more, so I got him looking at Catholicism and the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was a Jesuit priest. Eventually, though, he realizes that his calling has been and always will be his music.

VASISHTA: With many great artists, success is just a byproduct of their talent. In the case of Yadin, however, he seems chronically afraid of being successful. In fact, he becomes physically ill when success comes close.

LEE: Adele has admitted that she vomits before almost every show out of stage fright. There are a lot of musicians with the same affliction: Rod Stewart, Rihanna, Pavarotti, Barbra Streisand, to name a few. For Yadin, his stage fright stems not only from general shyness and introversion, but also from the self-consciousness that arises from having been a kid with acne—a basic mortification that someone might look at him and be repulsed. I myself was a kid with acne, and I've suffered from stage fright. When I was a grad student, I was chagrined to learn that being an author meant having to perform in front of people occasionally. I thought writers just holed up in a room. I sometimes wonder how many artists have subconsciously sabotaged their own careers because of stage fright.

VASISHTA: I, and I suspect many readers, want Mallory and Yadin to end up together. She's everything he isn't. She knows how to leverage the talent she has into success and celebrity and I couldn't help but feel he could do with letting her steer the ship. But he can't seem to get out of his own way to change his life.

LEE: I think all three of the main characters—Mallory, Yadin, and Jeanette—are incapable of change, and that's the tragic basis of their loneliness. In a book like this, especially with lonesome in the title, I wanted to be true to the realities of relationships in which old flames reunite, to acknowledge that they're often largely founded in nostalgia, ignoring the quotidian burdens of everyday life. Also, since we're talking about alt-country here, I wanted the romances to imbue the sadness of the saddest of ballads.

VASISHTA: You've written about the fictional Rosarita Bay before. Northern California with its aging hippie/surf vibe is a perfect place for your marginal characters. Do you worry that Silicon Valley has made everything so expensive there that you might be forced to find a new location?

LEE: The town's based on Half Moon Bay, which has defied development for decades, but I'm afraid that's been changing. The luxury resort and golf course in the novel, which was being built in my previous Rosarita Bay novel, *Wrack and Ruin*, is based on the Ritz-Carlton that opened in Half Moon Bay after years of civic resistance. So I think you're right: my characters and I are getting priced out, and we might have to move soon.

VASISHTA: I read that when you lived in Boston and edited *Ploughshares* from 1988 to 2007, you were often the only non-white person who attended literary events. You started out as an engineering major at UCLA and now you work in academia. Are the faces in your classroom growing more diverse than they once were? Do you envisage a time when writers of different ethnicities will stop being expected to write about their culture and being referred to first categorized by their ethnicity?

LEE: Yes, the faces are becoming more diverse, but pretty slowly. Likewise, I think writers of color still get trapped in an ethnic literature box in terms of what's expected of them, i.e., always having to write about the immigrant experience or discrimination or the old country or whatnot. That's partly why in this novel, I did something quietly subversive: I have a bunch of Asian, Latino, and African Americans as characters, but I never identify anyone by race. Hopefully in another generation or two, things will change.

VASISHTA: You lived all around the world and on both coasts in the U.S. People might assume that you're surrounded by kindred creative spirits, but you've said in the past, "I'm alone much of the time, always feeling somewhat unmoored and adrift," and that you are a "self-flagellating worrywart." There seems to be a similarity there with Yadin. Do you think solitude and neurosis comes with the territory of being a writer?

LEE: Oh, yeah, for sure. Every writer and artist I know is neurotic as hell. That feeling of aloneness, I think that's what drives most people into the arts—being alienated, not feeling that they belong. But I'm a lot less alone than I used to be. I'm engaged now to another fiction writer, Jane Delury, who has two daughters. Thankfully she's as neurotic as I am.

LONESOME LIES BEFORE US *IS OUT TODAY, JUNE 6, 2017.*



NARRATIVE

NARRATIVE 10



Don Lee is the author of four novels, *The Collective*, *Wrack and Ruin*, *Country of Origin*, and *Lonesome Lies Before Us* (Norton, 2017), as well as the story collection *Yellow*. Among his many honors are an American Book Award, the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction, an O. Henry Award, and a Pushcart Prize. Lee is the director of the MFA program in creative writing at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Photograph by Melissa Frost.

Narrative 10

WITH DON LEE

AS DON LEE'S latest novel, *Lonesome Lies Before Us*, goes to press, *Narrative* has a few burning questions for the author.

1. Who is your favorite character in fiction; your fave character in life?

I think in fiction it has to be William Stoner, the sad-sack professor in the heartbreaking novel *Stoner*. In real life it's the delightful writer Jane Delury, to whom I am engaged.

2. Your favorite line (that you or someone else wrote) that continues to inspire you?

The final line of John Cheever's story "Goodbye, My Brother," in which the narrator has been watching his wife and sister swimming in the ocean: "I saw them come out and I saw that they were naked, unshy, beautiful, and full of grace, and I watched the naked women walk out of the sea." Yes, it's sappy and overly symbolic, but the rhythms of that line still astonish me.

3. What story, book, or poem do you wish you could read again for the first time? What did it teach you?

This will seem boring, but *The Great Gatsby*. I used to reread it once a year in my twenties. It had an awful, detrimental effect on me. Because of it, I began writing overstylized prose with a horrible romantic streak in it. I didn't really understand the book. But then I realized that Nick Carraway was an unreliable character, and deep cynicism was buried in the book's apparent sentimentality, which made the novel much richer for me.

4. Best part of the day?

Dinnertime.

5. Your cure for when the spirit flags?

Friends, exercise, and nature. Even better all together.

6. Ten words you use most on the page? In life?

Both on the page and in real life, it's not the fancy words that I repeat too much. It's the ordinary words for transitions and qualifications, like these dull buggers and their dim variants: *simply/just, when/while/as/once, however/though, began/started, particularly/especially, entirely/completely, sometimes/occasionally, perhaps/maybe, finally/at last, and but/although*. When you write a book of any length, your syntactical tendencies really get exposed.

7. What's your current obsession?

Looking for a good acoustic guitar that's not too expensive. Because I am such a bad guitar player, I don't deserve a really good, expensive guitar, like a Martin D-18.

8. What's the most useful criticism you've ever received?

Stop taking yourself so seriously as a writer. This was a piece of criticism I gave to myself, about five years after I got my MFA. It changed everything for me.

9. What did you know at age twelve that you wish you hadn't forgotten; and/or what do you know now that you wish you knew then?

At age twelve I didn't wonder, all the time, what other people were thinking about me. That was a magical reprieve.

10. To quote Auden, "O tell me the truth about love." We're all ears.

The truth is, I didn't know a damn thing about love until I met my fiancée three and a half years ago. I wanted love, but I didn't know how to give or receive love, and I had pretty much given up on love until I met her. If there is a truth I could impart, it would be that

you have to keep open to the possibility of love, because you never know when and how and where and with whom it might emerge.

Finally, is there a short passage from the new book you'd like to share with our readers?

How about the opening paragraphs of the novel?

In his teens, Yadin Park had considered himself ugly—a judgment that was overly harsh, yet, at the time, not entirely unfounded.

To begin with, he had been big. Not obese, exactly, but chunky, ungainly, tall, a couple of slugs over six feet. Since a child, he had yearned to be smaller, less conspicuous, inhabit less specter, but his body always betrayed him. He swelled his shirts. His neck distended. He was pigeon-toed, and his pants buffed where his thighs corraded. His feet were clowns. Then there was his head, which to him felt elephantine. His hair was black and matted in wiry waves and seemed vaguely pubic in origin. His face, he believed, bordered on barbarity, with its hocked jaw, thin, chapped lips, and knob of a nose. Most tragic had been his skin, pocked and gullied with acne, rippling hieroglyphs of teenage sorrow. ❧

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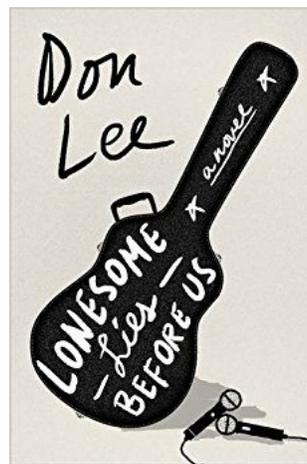
BALTIMORE WRITERS CLUB

Baltimore Writers Club #5: Don Lee's Lonesome Lies Before Us

1 Written by: [Marion Winik](#) | Friday, Jun 16, 2017 11:00am

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Here's a preview ... don't miss the launch on June 22, 7 pm, at Bird in Hand.

According to the bio on the back of his fifth book, *Lonesome Lies Before Us*, Don Lee "splits his time between Philadelphia and Baltimore." I laughed when I read this. Don't most two-city authors split their time between San Francisco and Paris? Or New York and Rome?

Since this is the Baltimore Writers Club, which is all about gossip and who you know, I will now reveal just how the very talented Mr. Lee came to divide his attentions between these twin cities of the global jet set. *Cherchez la femme*, my friends. In this case, Jane Delury, the Baltimore fiction writer to whom the novel is dedicated, also my colleague at the University of Baltimore, and also the author of a novel-in-stories to be covered in this column when it comes out next spring, is the reason we in Charm City now lay claim to half of Don Lee.

Fans of Lee will be excited to hear that *Lonesome Lies Before Us* returns to the author's fictional town of Rosarita Bay, California, where both the stories in his first book, *Yellow*, and his comic novel, *Wrack and Ruin*, were set. Always down at the heels — a sort of California version of Richard Russo's washed-up towns in New York State — Rosarita Bay is in worse shape than ever in 2011, about to shut down its public library and outsource its police department. Participating in the general decline is former alt-country singer-songwriter Yadin Park, 46. After screwing up his career with self-defeating choices, performance anxiety, cystic acne and last but not least, a severe case of Meniere's disease which has rendered him partly deaf, Yadin is laying carpet for Matsuda Wall to Wall, and dating the daughter of the owner, Jeanette.

That sounds like the set-up for a comedy, which this book — as its title suggests — is not, despite a few hilarious set pieces. Both Yadin and Jeanette are people who thought they would be somewhere entirely different than where they've ended up. Jeanette started out as an artist and an activist; she took a photo of some earthquake victims at the age of 17 that put her on the map as a photographer. Now she is cleaning rooms at the Centurion Hotel and has a house full of interesting objects that seem like they must belong to someone else. There's a story there, but it will take a while to unfold.

A third study in disappointment is offered by one-time country-western star Mallory Wicks. After years as the darling of the fans and the media, Mallory's last album was described by critics as "an insult to musicians everywhere" and "possibly the worst album in the history of recorded country music." Tabloids started running pictures of her looking bloated and angry in unfortunate

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bikinis. Since then, she's retreated from the spotlight and has been spending her time playing golf, which is just what she plans to do when she comes to stay at the Centurion.

Don Lee has other plans for her, though.

Back to that title – *Lonesome Lies Before Us*. It's the name of a song Yadin has written for what he is sure will be his last album, a self-produced effort he's working on alone and in secret. I wasn't sure just what it meant, so I was glad when on page 212, another character asks Yadin about it. "There are lies that are lonesome, and they're right in front of us?... Or there are people, other people, who made lonesome lies in the past, which still affect everything that's happening to us now?"

"What?" says Yadin. "No. Lonesomeness, or loneliness, it's lying before us, laid out ahead of us, in our future, for everyone, no matter what we do."

"You might need to change that," says the other character.

Without giving any more away, it can be said neither Yadin nor his creator takes this advice.

We caught up with Don Lee somewhere amid his jet-setting between Baltimore and Philly to ask a few questions.

Talk about your Yoknapatawpha County, Rosarita Bay. What's it based on? What's it like to have all these books set in one place? Do you use recurring locales or characters?

It's based on Half Moon Bay, a little town south of San Francisco that's managed to stay undeveloped. I never planned on having more than one book, much less three, set there, but I've done it out of, well, maybe desperation and lack of imagination! Starting a book, the first question for me is always setting, and when I get stuck, I seem to just go back to this town. I wanted to write something about the effects of the Great Recession on ordinary people, and when I looked up what had happened to Half Moon Bay since the last time I wrote about it, all the events—stores closing, residents getting laid off and relocating, the city outsourcing its services—were perfect for the novel. I have a lot of recurring locales, especially the golf course and luxury resort that were, controversially, in construction in *Wrack and Ruin*. They're fully operational now and figure prominently in *Lonesome*.

It was Judith Krantz, I believe, who said that people love to read about work — what goes on at other people's jobs. One of the things I loved about your book is the incredible detail given on the job of cleaning hotel rooms... both fancy ones and crappy ones. How do you know all this?

I love to read (and write) about work. I know this is a distinctly American thing. Europeans always say, with condescension, "Why do you Americans always ask, 'What do you do?' Why is this so important to you?" Well, because people—at least in the US—are so often defined by their jobs, and as a novelist, it's how I get to know my characters. I did a bunch of research on housekeeping rituals and procedures at the Ritz-Carlton and the Four Seasons. Then I looked up those articles you see all the time about ten dirty hotel secrets and the like. It was actually fun stuff and made me appreciate the work. When I stay at a hotel now, I never forget to tip the housekeeper.

So, you're not a hotel maid. Are you a singer-songwriter? Don't lie to me, you seem to know too much about Martin guitars for a layperson.

Nope, I'm not a singer-songwriter—not even a wannabe. The snippets of the three songs in the book were the first lyrics I'd ever attempted, and they were terrible! That's why I enlisted the help of a professional, Will Johnson, the frontman for the beloved band Centro-matic. He saved me. (I emailed him out of the blue, and he stunned me by responding.) But I've been playing guitar *badly* for the last several years (first started in high school, then stopped for more than two decades, then picked it up again, aided by the abundance of free YouTube lessons and tabs online). I almost bought a vintage Martin D-18 recently but decided I'm too awful of a guitar player to deserve a Martin.

***Lonesome Lies Before Us*, like much else of what you've written, is about what it means to be an artist. As a woman whose own career is a cross between Yadin Park and Mallory Wicks, I really loved what I think you're saying. To oversimplify: it doesn't matter if you fail, you still can't quit. Am I on the right track?**

Yes, you have to keep at it, you have to follow your passion, you have to keep that artistic well inside of you alive, no matter what, *but*...you shouldn't need external validation like a book deal or a record deal or accolades or awards to continue, to believe that what you're doing has value, to justify your efforts, because in the end, what does all that matter, it's just bullshit, it's the process, the act of creating, that really counts. That's the full message.

What kind of name is Yadin? Also, I noticed that people have seemingly Asian names in this book like Park and Matsuda, but there are no other clues about their ethnicity. Is that intentional?

It's a Hungarian name. I picked it up watching pro surfing. There used to be a guy on the world tour named Yadin Nicol. But he doesn't look Hungarian. He's a blond Australian. So my character, Yadin Park, is supposed to be half Korean, half Hungarian Jew, but I decided not to identify anyone's ethnicity or race in the book, although I have Asian Americans and Latino Americans and

2 Something Different for Halloween: A Night Hike Through Druid Hill Park

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African Americans. In my career, I've alternated: I'll write a book that confronts race head-on, as I did in my last novel, *The Collective*, and then I'll get sick of it and subversively ignore the issue of race altogether, as I did here. You're one of the few people who have noticed I did this! Which was sort of the point.

It seemed really amazing to me that the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins plays a key role in this book. Talk about that.

That was from being an English major, having to read that old green *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. I was working on the first draft, and I knew the novel needed something else, something to add a little heft. I had an offhand allusion to the characters belonging to the choir of a Unitarian Universalist church, and I thought it might be interesting if Yadin was seeking a deeper spiritual connection. Then I remembered that Gerard Manley Hopkins was a Jesuit priest who never published any of his poetry in his lifetime, so as not to violate the humility of his position, which was ideal for the theme of the book. Plus, all his poems, I was happy to learn, were public domain.

Okay, Don! Thank you! We'll see you at your Baltimore launch... at Bird in Hand, on June 22 at 7 pm., in conversation with your friend and mine, Professor Jane Delury.

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University of Baltimore Professor Marion Winik writes *Bohemian Rhapsody* for the Baltimore Fishbowl on the first Wednesday of the month. She is the author of "First Comes Love", "The Glen Rock Book of the Dead" and other books, and the host of The Weekly Reader on WYPR. Sign up for her monthly email at marionwinik.com.

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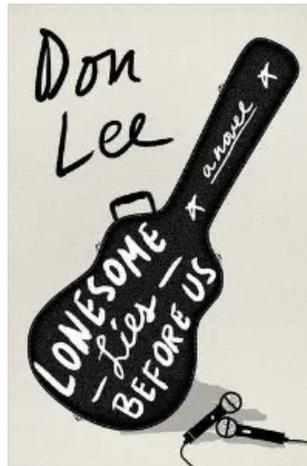
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"Nope! I've never had any aspirations to be a musician": Don Lee talks LONESOME LIES BEFORE US

When Don Lee's first book came out 16 years ago, he probably didn't know then that more than half his writing career would be spent in Rosarita Bay, a fictional California seaside town that bears more than a passing resemblance to the real-world Half Moon Bay on Highway 1 in Northern California. Of the five books Lee has published to date, three have been Rosarita-bound. *Yellow*—his wonderfully quirky debut—is set there, and in *Wrack & Ruin* (2008), we meet a Rosarita-based artist-turned-brussels-sprouts farmer and his estranged, money-and-image-obsessed movie-producer brother in the midst of an unplanned reunion.

Lee's latest novel, *Lonesome Lies Before Us*—out last week—puts us back on familiar ground. Today's Rosarita Bay may be on the brink of bankruptcy, but it's still the right place for former musician Yadin Park, who inherited a ramshackle house from a grandmother he barely knew. Currently in the carpet business and dating the boss's daughter, his hearing is getting worse, though he still manages to write songs in his pieced-together home studio. Then Yadin's old lover and music partner (who made it big) reappears in his life, showing what happens when loneliness and hope collide.

Recently, I caught up with Lee for an online interview, but I forgot to ask him about his obsession—windsurfing! We still had plenty of topics to cover, however, including recessions, panic, golf course owners, (un)intentional plans, and K-pop.



TERRY HONG: What made you go back to Rosarita Bay?

Don Lee: A false start, actually. Originally, I was going to make it a road book, in which a singer-songwriter was going on his last tour for his last self-released album, and he was going to visit four cities where his former bandmates lived. But I realized this wasn't a book I wanted to write, and I panicked! I decided it'd be better to set it in one place, and at first I considered a facsimile of Marfa, Texas, where I'd spent a few summers, and then I thought of Rosarita Bay. I wondered what had been happening in the town that's its inspiration, Half Moon Bay, California, and I learned all sorts of stuff had been going on there that aligned with what I wanted—namely, how it'd been affected by the great recession. The city almost had to declare bankruptcy.

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Panic worked in this case for sure! So that golf course resort/luxury hotel in *Lonesome*: Am I wrong in thinking Woody from *Wrack & Ruin* had anything to do with it? And did I miss any other overlaps?

Yes, that's the golf course and hotel that Woody was helping to develop in *Wrack & Ruin*! I have other place references from that book and from *Yellow*. In early drafts, I had recurring characters as well from the earlier books, but I ended up taking them out because they seemed distracting.

I LOVE those details. I need to read all three in order now to see where the overlaps are!!

The books do follow a trajectory in terms of the town's economic ups and downs.



Are any parts of Yadin's career autobiographical? Were you/are you a musician, too?

Nope! I've never had any aspirations to be a musician, like some people have already assumed. I do, however, play bad guitar. I mean, like, I will never become a good guitar player no matter how much I practice. I played in high school, then got back into it about three years ago. What's changed in the intervening time is the Internet. There are thousands of guitar tabs and YouTube instructional videos available, so it's much easier to learn to play songs.

Given your love of not-Half Moon Bay, any plans to ever live there someday?

Oh, I would love to have a place there or in that area someday! But it's very expensive, you know. Plus, I think I am now an East Coast guy. Though I will likely return to Rosarita Bay sometime in the future in another book.

I'm reading a pattern of sorts with your fiction—more comical (*Yellow*) set in Rosarita Bay, more serious (*Country of Origin*) set elsewhere, more comical (*Wrack & Ruin*) back in Rosarita Bay, more serious (*The Collective*) set elsewhere, not as comical but more comical than not (*Lonesome*) back once more in Rosarita Bay. Is that coincidental? Do you have a master plan?

I think that has more to do with my moods than any intentional plan. For instance, I'll write about race in one book, get sick of it, and not write about it in the next book. The Rosarita Bay books happen to fall into the non-race rotations, so maybe that's why they're less serious. Not sure what the next visit will entail!

Given this not-intentional pattern, the next title to hit shelves is gonna tend toward more serious. Care to give us a sneak peek?

I think it will be about an architect. I'm really interested in mid-century modernism and minimalism. But for some reason, I want to throw in a K-pop star who is hiding from a scandal in there. And maybe something about a chef!

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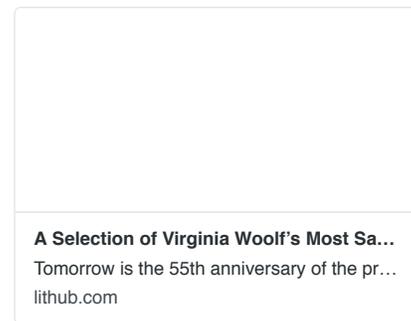
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