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CORNERED: Andre Dubus III

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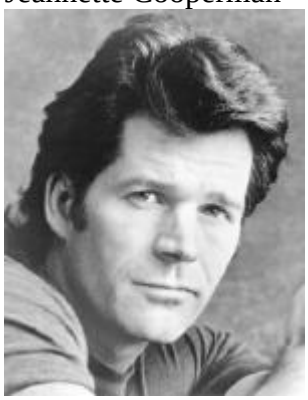

Andre Dubus III (Marion Ettinger)

Andre Dubus III is the son of the great Catholic short story writer, recipient of a Pushcart Prize and National Magazine Award, writing teacher at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, finalist for a National Book Award for *House of Sand and Fog*, now also a movie, and most recently, author of *The Garden of Last Days*. He?s on his way to the dump. He?s just finished building a white cedar railing for the house he built in the woods in Newburyport, Mass., and in the final triumphant nail-pounding he forgot all about this interview. He gives it anyway, with warmth and ease and a waiting truckload of wood scraps. ?Ever smell white cedar?? he asks. ?It smells like vanilla with lemon when you cut it.?

How do you stay so down to earth?

First of all, I?ve got a stuffy name.

So you?re overcompensating?

In my experience, people who put on airs are awfully career-conscious and overly keen on how they appear to others. I am only a writer because I love writing every day, even when it?s going terribly. I feel very fortunate and still very surprised to have a publishing career, but I rarely ever think about it. I?m just absorbed in whatever I?m working on. I have this theory that if there?s any one enemy to human creativity, it?s self-consciousness.

Are you immune to it?

Oh no. I avoid reading The New York Times Book Review because it gets me too career-conscious. And of course, we all want to live 140 years. But in reality, life?s too damned short to be wasting energy worrying about what people think about you. Nadine Gordimer once wrote that sincerity is never speaking from a fixed idea of oneself.

How much of writing talent is genes and how much is sweat?

My father wrote short stories, the writer James Lee Burke is a first cousin. ? But as a writing teacher, I?ve seen time and time again: Talent doesn?t make much difference if somebody doesn?t work. My dad?s dad was a pipefitter, kind of a mythic man from Louisiana; he used to say, ?The harder I work, the luckier I get.?

You were bullied as a kid. Why?

We were financially poor. My dad was making $7,000 a year teaching English, and then my parents divorced, and we spent the next seven years moving two or three times a year to find cheaper rent. So I got beat up because I was the new kid in town. Kids are the cruelest people on earth, until they grow up and get even crueler.

How did the bullying affect you?

I became a boxer and went looking for bullies. And I found them very easily. The little boy in me who used to get beat up is proud of that; the man is not. I really do believe that violence causes more violence.

Is there any belief you?ve done a 180 on?

When I was 19 or 20 and moving away from physical violence, getting educated at the University of Texas in Austin, I immersed myself in sociology, economics, political theory. I studied institutionalized bullying -- imperialism, colonialism, multinational corporations raping poor countries -- and became a rabid Marxist for about a year. And it?s just too simple. The larger transition was away from thinking there were good and bad people. I like what Tom Waits said: ?There is no devil; there?s just God when he?s drunk.?

I wonder what your dad would have said to that? He was so deeply Catholic.

He couldn?t have lived without it. Before he got run over in an accident that left him paraplegic, he went to Mass seven days a week. One of the last things I saw him do was pray the rosary. I once heard him say -- it?s interesting to hear an interview with your own parent -- that he couldn?t imagine how anyone could live without faith.

Your wife?s a devout Greek Orthodox, and your three kids are Catholic. What do you believe in?

I believe in the divine. I believe in mysteries. I think I believe in angels, spirits. And I believe Jesus was a beautiful man who maybe had divine powers. But I don?t believe in some big boss up there, and I don?t think I?m going to hell -- or heaven either. My religion?s the writing process: I have all these rituals and totems around it, and I put myself in a humble position and try to be open.

What sustains imagination?

Curiosity. I think there?s a difference between making something up and imagining it. When writing?s going well, I?m just receiving. You go in without a clue, and you?re free-falling in the black forest -- and there?s nothing boring about that.

Do you ever worry that imagination?s in danger, as technology drowns us in virtual reality?

Memoir sells better than novels. I think we?re living in a fundamentalist time. A fundamental note has no undertones and overtones, and it?s flat to every ear, musicologists tell us. We?ve got terrible information overload, and we just have not got time or patience for nuance or examined experience. We have gotten to be very literal and therefore addicted to reality television and eyewitness videos. We somehow think by seeing the thing we are seeing the thing. And guess what? We are wrong.

So where do we go from here?

I think people are going to start turning off these gadgets and go back to the book. I think the soul needs it. Tim O?Brien says writers tend to be the kind of people who want to enter the mystery of things. Well, that?s also what readers want.

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