

1. Charlie's return to small town Texas life is fraught with mixed feelings of regret, guilt, and happiness. Why did you decide to write a homecoming novel?

A few years ago, I had a big homecoming of my own. I hadn't lived in Texas since I graduated from high school, but in the spring of 2012 I received an invitation to a retreat for Texan writers, The Dobie Paisano Fellowship. It's a uniquely wonderful opportunity: for six months at a time, a single writer is given the keys to a 250-acre ranch in the Hill Country near Austin. The timing was serendipitous. For nearly a year, I'd been starting and then throwing away new manuscripts, and my Brooklyn apartment had just been infested by flies, then roaches, and there were rumors of bedbugs on the floor below. I packed my bags and happily moved into six months of Texan isolation.

Alone among all the cacti, cedar and dusty land, my nostalgia for my Texan childhood was immediate and overwhelming. I could practically see the boyhood version of myself tooling around in the creek bluffs. I was also not so far from my hometown of Plano, where my family still lives. In my time at the ranch, I visited home often.

Though Plano (or at least my family's corner of it) was still a scruffy prairie town as recently as the 80's, over my childhood it became an affluent Dallas suburb. For several years in the '90s it was the fastest growing city in America. But beneath all this sudden prosperity was some profound darkness. In the '80s—and again in the '90s, when I was a teenager—the press labeled Plano both the “Suicide Capital” and “Heroin Capital” of America. Within a two-year period, when I was sixteen and seventeen, more than twenty kids from my town died in a spate of heroin overdoses and suicides. I lost friends to suicide, and when I was a junior my school counselor ended her own life.

All of this is now nearly twenty years in the past, but wandering around Plano at the age of thirty, I still felt haunted by the legacy of those years, by the older version of Plano I knew and also by all those vanished kids. The first stirrings of what would become this novel came from the strong, often disquieting sensation I had – both on the ranch, and back in Plano—that some part of my own life was still there too, frozen at the moment I'd left.

The Loving family and the story of Oliver are fictional, but were the events in the book inspired by any other real life situations or events?

At the most fundamental level, what inspired me to write *Oliver Loving* was the history of my hometown and the need to revisit a vanished childhood. Over the years it took me to write this novel, I also thought often of our country's horrific and widening gun violence epidemic. Each time I read the news of yet another mass shooting, I thought of my own town's legacy of sudden and catastrophic loss, the grief that I knew would never fully fade, the painful understanding that a part of each affected family would remain trapped at that horrible moment. But there is also another real-life story at the heart of this novel, the story of a Belgian man named Rom Houben.

You might have heard of Rom Houben. A few years back, his name was all over the news. In his early twenties, Rom got into a bad car crash and suffered a severe traumatic brain injury. After initial tests and scans, doctors determined Rom was in a

persistent vegetative state, and he spent the following two decades silent in a hospital bed. One day, twenty-three years after the crash, an ambitious neurologist came to subject Rom to a new form of neuroimaging. The doctor was stunned: the new tests revealed a brain that appeared fully conscious, responding to questions and stimuli. Apparently, Rom had been misdiagnosed; he had been awake and aware the entire time, and yet he had been unable to communicate his predicament.

Desperate for a way to let Rom speak, his family hired a speech therapist who made swift and remarkable progress. The speech therapist discovered some faint movement in Rom's hand, and she helped Rom type on a touch screen. With the therapist guiding his fingers, Rom offered a remarkably cogent and fairly lyrical account of his locked-in life: "I had traveled with my thoughts into the past, or into another existence altogether... I'll never forget the day they discovered me. It was my second birth." Rom's story became a minor media sensation — he even got a book deal.

And yet, some scientists and mental health professionals remained unconvinced. These skeptics saw that Rom's speech therapist was using a controversial technique called "Facilitated Communication," often employed with severe aphasia cases like locked-in syndrome and nonverbal autism, which has become notorious for its vulnerability to something called the "Ideomotor Effect" or "Ouija Board Effect." Apparently, these speech therapists often want so much to believe that they can feel the patient twitching out replies that they convince themselves that they can perceive the patient's purposeful muscle movements when in fact the patient is incapable of any movement at all. The language these speech therapists help their patients "type" often turns out to be nothing but the language that the speech therapists subconsciously project onto their patients. Well, after a few simple test, scientists found out that, while Rom had indeed been conscious for years, all of the supposed statements he had made had come not from Rom but from the speech therapist herself. In the press, the story of Rom's "rebirth" with the help of the speech therapist was written off as a hoax. And so Rom remains as before, conscious but unable to communicate.

Long after the story had faded from public attention, I still found myself thinking of Rom Houben and his family's desperate hope that had allowed the situation with the speech therapist progress as far as it had. Though Rom's story is of course radically uncommon, I felt that it suggested something heartbreakingly universal about the relationship between parents and children, something about the dream version of a child any parent maintains to protect them against loss. This theme was especially poignant in light of all those classmates and friends who I had lost in my high school years. I kept finding myself drawn back to the poignancy and moral ambiguity of Rom Houben's dilemma, and eventually elements of that real-life scenario became essential parts of my fiction.

3. You grew up in Texas yourself. What inspired you to write about your own home state?

In my teenage years in Plano, when I looked out at the empty prairie that was so quickly filling up with housing subdivisions and strip malls, I remember feeling that my town was a kind of no place, that it could just as well have been any American suburb. But when I

returned to Texas for a long stay after living away for twelve years, I was surprised to realize how particular and unique that landscape felt to me, how deeply my own sense of self was bound up with the state's culture, history, and outspoken identity. During my fellowship at Paisano Ranch, I spent a part of every day tromping through the wilderness, and I also set aside a couple daily hours for reading that house's collection of books on the history and mythology of Texas. I was especially fortunate that the ranch in which I was living had once been the home of J Frank Dobie, the great Texan folklorist. The legends and historical tales Dobie collected still fill his shelves, and the more I read and thought about Texas, the more it intrigued me. While the mythic Wild West past of Texas is certainly central to its boisterous persona, the state is so young and quickly changing that all that history is only part of the place's story. The story of Texas is still amorphous, shifting, half-formed, and a huge part of this project for me was my desire to better understand how the state's historical and sociopolitical forces shaped my own Texan childhood.

4. After the incident at the school, Charlie is home schooled. How does Charlie's experience being home schooled by Eve change and influence their relationship?

My own mother homeschooled me from ages nine to fourteen. In many ways, the fictional Charlie and Eve are different from my mother and me, and certainly the way they homeschooled is quite unlike the way we spent our homeschooling years, but there is a certain intensity to the homeschooling relationship that I felt compelled to describe. When you are homeschooled (and especially when you are the only student) your educator serves so many roles for you –parent, teacher, closest friend, principal, counselor, on and on -- that he or she comprises nearly the entire world of your childhood. It can make the end of childhood an especially complex and painful separation. Charlie is right in the thick of that transition in this novel, as he finds himself pulled in two opposite directions, both longing for that lost closeness and also trying to claim independence by absenting himself from his childhood home.

5. How did the name OLIVER LOVING come to you?

The name might not mean much to non-Texan readers, but the legendary cattleman Oliver Loving (cofounder of the storied Goodnight-Loving cattle trail) is a central character in Texas's Wild West history. At first, I only used the name Oliver Loving as a placeholder as I wrote because I loved the sound of it (the homophone, "All of her loving" was especially appealing), and also because the historical associations I felt with that name helped me conjure the spirit of West Texas. But as I continued to write, that famous name seemed more and more fitting, the perfect name for a boy situated in the nebulous territory between legend and reality.

6. Families torn apart by tragedy is a topic as ancient as the Greeks. What books and stories influenced you while writing OLIVER LOVING?

I like that you mentioned the Greeks. As a kid, my bookshelves were crammed with illustrated histories and storybooks about Greek myths and gods. In some ways, I think

all those ancient tales set my idea of how to tell a story. Zeus never hurls a thunderbolt from high Olympus in my novels, but in almost everything I write, I try to cultivate the feeling of something supernatural or metaphysical, something larger than daily human drama at work. In the case of *Oliver Loving*, I drew upon myths native to Texas, as borrowed from the folktales of J. Frank Dobie. There were also a number of Texan books that helped me set the stage: John Graves' *Goodbye to a River*, Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* and *Blood Meridian*, and a number of stories by Larry McMurtry. As I wrote I also thought often of my favorite family novels and stories: *East of Eden*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Sons and Lovers*, *Angle of Repose*, *The Man Who Loved Children*, *Light Years*, *The Stone Diaries*, *The Corrections*, *On Beauty*, and the short stories of Alys Munro and Adam Haslett. Oh, and the delightful *The Infinities* by John Banville, in which the old Greek gods intervene in the drama of a modern-day family.

7. The novel ends on a very hopeful note. Do you think Oliver is ever able to hear the loved ones who have surrounded his bed for years?

I know how frustrating and dishonest it can seem when a writer won't answer such a basic question. It's like when a politician, beginning to do campaign events, won't yet admit to running for office. But in the case of this book, that question truly is one that I can't answer. From the beginning, I wanted to tell the story of how people grapple with a central, urgent, unanswerable question. I wanted to leave the reader with the same question the family is left with at the end, a question whose answer depends on your own belief, not on hard facts.

8. Do you think hope can be a dangerous thing?

When I was in college, a Psychology professor once told our class that studies show that depressed people make the most accurate predictions about the future, whereas non-depressed people tend to make overly optimistic assessments. In the view of psychologists, to be a little deluded with hope is to be in a good state of mental health! Hope, even delusional hope, is obviously necessary for survival. And yet, the suspension of disbelief that hope requires can often be immensely damaging, blinding us to the truth of a situation. For all the characters in this novel (and for Eve most of all), hope and the truth are often at odds. I guess it's a paradox that we all have to live with on some level, and I find myself wrestling with it again and again in my writing.

9. Why do you think Rebekkah and Jed held onto their secrets for so long? Why do we keep quiet when the truth can help us heal?

The truth might help us heal, but when you weigh the possible ramifications of confessing to something shameful, the scales can easily tip in favor of concealment. Healing can be so abstract and hard to comprehend whereas the possibility of the condemnation and loss of your loved ones can be horribly easy to imagine. I think that a secret is usually not something that is chosen. It is mostly an attempt to keep something from public view, but then the secret quickly takes on a life of its own. In the wake of ineffable grief, a secret can also become a welcome companion. The secret becomes

proof that the story is not yet over, and it can become a specific, namable pain that in some ways is easier to live with than the unnamable enormity of what has been lost.

10. How do you see the Lovings moving on from the events of the novel?

I think that fiction, more than any other art form, is inherently a collaboration between the artist and the audience. Based on the black markings on a white page that we share, it's up to both of us to imagine the world into existence. When I truly connect with a book as a reader, the characters continue to feel alive in my own imagination, and whatever might happen after the last page belongs as much to me as the reader as it does to the writer. In writing *Oliver Loving*, I wanted to deliver my characters to a moment of transformation but leave it up to the reader to imagine what might follow.