

The Ha-Ha by Dave King (*Little, Brown; published January 11, 2005*)

DAVE KING

A Quick Questionnaire (involving Proust)

Born: 1955, Meriden, CT

Super Brief Bio: Dave King holds a BFA in painting and film from Cooper Union and an MFA in writing from Columbia University. His poetry has been published in *The Paris Review* and *Big City Lit*, and he has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He lives in the DUMBO section of Brooklyn, New York.

Other Activities Besides Writing: King currently teaches English at Baruch College and cultural studies and poetry at the School of Visual Arts. He has worked as an editor (at The Little Book Room, a small press in New York), a florist, a bartender, a photographer's assistant, and a mechanicals artist. Away from his desk, he's an avid skier and bicyclist, and games of all types are important to him. In his spare time he has been renovating a small factory building in Columbia County, New York, where he's "an enthusiastic but modestly gifted gardener."

Expanded bio: King's father, a former prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials, was Acting General Counsel for the U.S. Foreign Economic Aid Program during the Eisenhower administration, and King attended public school in Maryland until the family moved to Cleveland in the mid 1960's. King graduated from Northfield Mount Hermon School in 1973, after which he and a friend set out for Tokyo. They landed instead in Kodiak, Alaska, where they worked the line at a cannery and read (of course) Steinbeck. But this adventure, says King, is a subject for another book.

In 1975 King moved to New York, and a year later entered The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, studying with Jim Dine, Lee Krasner, and Robert Breer, among others. In 1980 he received his BFA, with a major in painting and a minor in film. Working out of a studio on Avenue B in New York, he pursued a career in painting during a time when the city's most experimental galleries were concentrated in the East Village. (King was also an occasional volunteer model for painter friends and posed for several of that era's representative works by painters Thomas Woodruff, Dan Witz, and others. A later portrait, by artist Fred Tomaselli, has toured major museums worldwide). During this period, King and his partner founded a small decorative painting firm, producing murals and trompe-l'oeil decoration for some of the world's most celebrated residential designers. Among their well-known clients were Barbara Walters, Sumner Redstone, Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, and Princess Christina of the Netherlands. They also painted at The White House, The State Department, Blair House (the President's guest house) and The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

King enrolled in the Writing Division of Columbia University's School of the Arts in 1997, receiving academic fellowships for both years of his course work. Among the writers he worked with at Columbia are Michael Cunningham, Fenton Johnson, Richard Howard, April Bernard, Lucie-Brock-Broido, and David Plante. (Outside of Columbia, he has studied with Amy Hempel, Melvin Jules Bukiet, and Marie Ponsot, among others.) In 1998 and '99, he was editor-in-chief of *Columbia*, the nationally distributed literary journal published by the Writing Division. King received his Columbia MFA in fiction in 2000, with **THE HA-HA**, in somewhat different form, serving as his graduate thesis.

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How He Came to Write a Book Narrated by a Character Who Cannot Speak: King has been interested in disability for some time. “To examine disability,” he notes, “is to examine ability, too: to question what it means to call oneself normal, mainstream, typical. More specifically, the character of Howard Kapostash grew from a contemplation of my older brother Hank, who was born profoundly autistic and was not ever known to speak. Hank did, however, have a repertoire of sounds and simple gestures, and it was possible to engage in rudimentary communication with him. After his death at age 44, I found myself wondering what his life would have been like if he had been born with more normal abilities, and it was a shock to realize that because of his age, Hank would absolutely have had to face the prospect of Vietnam. Interestingly, this idea seemed so remote during his lifetime that I’d never thought of it, but after his death it took on more prominence. So while the character of Howard Kapostash cannot be taken as a literal portrait of my brother, it absolutely developed from these ruminations.”

On Writers and Influence: “When I was still primarily a painter,” King says, “I was very into reading biographies of writers. Coleridge, Beckett, Woolf, and plenty of others. One of the most influential was Furbank’s biography of E. M. Forster, in which Forster says that he never knows where his books will end; he just starts with characters and a situation and moves forward step by step. I was struck by this—first because Forster’s books *seem* so elegantly plotted, and secondly because Forster’s statement contradicted everything I’d imagined about writers’ methods but seemed so thoroughly in accord with how I worked as a painter. Forster’s a crucial influence on a whole lot of levels, but that particular statement allowed me to maintain a very fluid approach in writing **THE HA-HA**: to strive for invention at every turn.”

Other influences include Willa Cather (“the least lionized of the great American authors,” King says), Anthony Powell (“for his mastery of the extended crowd scene”) W. G. Sebald (“the long narrative line”), early Hemingway (“his willingness to make readers work”), and, yes, Woolf, Coleridge and Beckett. As a former painter, King also cites Correggio for teaching him the beauty of a strong formal structure and Bonnard for a truly heroic allegiance to the personal vision.

What distinguishes THE HA-HA from other novels of disability?: King admits to a great affinity for Jonathon Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn*. “I was well into work on **THE HA-HA** when I read it, he says, “and I was so struck by the similarity of our projects; both books examine the dialectic between the hero’s rich inner life and curtailed communicative abilities.” But unlike some books with similar themes, **THE HA-HA** features a hero not born to his disability. Howard Kapostash has lived a happy, ordinary American until his injury at age 18, and the book resonates with his struggle to reconcile the many hopes and expectations he once took for granted. It’s this element of loss, combined with our knowledge that though Howard’s life may improve his condition will not, that adds to the poignancy of Howard’s journey.

Finally, an anecdote: “For most of my college years I supported myself driving a New York City taxicab on nights and weekends, working my way through the seven volumes of Proust while I drove. I’d keep the book in my lap and read at traffic lights, and each of Proust’s meandering sentences might take a whole run of stoplights to complete. Moving from one light to the next, I’d consider the clause I’d just read, and I still feel that this was a viable way to consume such a long book. It was bad for business, though; whenever a fare started a conversation I’d announce fiercely that I was *reading*, and the resulting tips were generally poor!”

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