

BETWEEN THE LINES WITH DAVE KING

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Giving voice to the voiceless

By Robin Dougherty | January 23, 2005

Howard Kapotash can't speak or read or write. He can't use the telephone or express an abstract idea. Having suffered a head wound in Vietnam, he now works as a groundskeeper at a convent in a large Midwestern city. Although he thinks the most important trauma in his life has already happened, Howard experiences an accident of another sort when his high school girlfriend unexpectedly leaves her 9-year-old son with him for eight weeks while she enters rehab.

Howard is the protagonist of "The Ha-Ha," Dave King's debut novel, which is told almost entirely as Howard's internal monologue.

The book's title takes its name from a term for an 18th-century landscaping device, a kind of sunken fence that creates an illusion of continuity around a fissure. It's a fitting metaphor.

Although he carries around cards that explain his disability, stating that he is of "normal intelligence," Howard's interaction with the world, including some strangers who now live in his family home, is anything but smooth.

King, a onetime painter who teaches writing at New York's Baruch College and at the School of Visual Arts, talked about the book he worked on for seven years.

Q. This story was partially inspired by your autistic brother?

A. The operative word is partially.

I was interested in disabilities for a while. I had written other fiction with disabled characters.

One thing that engages me, that I think is a contemporary topic, is the question of what is normal.

What is typical? . . . It's a national obsession at present to fit into the mainstream. One of the things I found interesting to explore [is] the way disabled people are treated.

The way they are looked at.

My brother Hank was born in 1949. There was no effort to mainstream him. The studies in autism were very crude at that point. . . .

When my brother died in 1993 of a brain tumor, I found myself in moments of reverie asking myself what his life would have been like if he had been normally abled. I thought, oh of course, he would have gone to Vietnam. . . . Howard is not a portrait of my brother. One of the themes of the book is loss of normalcy, which Hank wouldn't have experienced.

Q. How did you find Howard's voice, the voice of someone who can't speak or write?

A. The voice of Howie was something that came through working, through working very hard. Through writing the book and rewriting the book, both intuitively and nonintuitively, trying to solve the problem as though it were a riddle or a task.

. . .

Each of us inside our heads is perfectly articulate. We don't struggle to express ourselves. That was very liberating [to realize]. I'm going to give him a vocabulary, an interesting diction. At one point I took it further. Wouldn't it be interesting if the inside of Howie's head was poetry. I wrote about 50 pages of the book in iambic pentameter.

. . . I wasn't a good enough poet. I put it back into prose. That was the kind of experimentation I did.

Q. Howie is just barely in the war. He's injured on day 16. He doesn't have a chance to bond with the other soldiers. . . .

A. The first person I knew who died in Vietnam -- Louis Jilek -- he lived next door to us and babysat for me when I was a child. I came home from school one day and my mother, who had opposed the war anyway, was just rampaging around the kitchen. He died in a traffic accident or something. My mother's point [was] it didn't even advance the goal of the war. She was so distressed over what she saw, at the pointlessness. I wanted Howard's injury [to be] similar -- something that did not serve any purpose. Something that could [have] just as easily not happened.

Q. Talk about what it's like to have a narrator who can't speak or read or write? It seems restricting, but does it give you some freedom that having a totally able-bodied narrator doesn't?

A. Sure. One of the things that I tell my students is that restrictions can be very limiting. They force you to be ingenious. That's why we continue to write sonnets. . . . For me, there were various things it forced me to do. It forced me to deepen his character. . . . It forced me to make [his] observations as distinct as possible. He notices the world around him in a way that other characters probably don't.

In a lot of first-person narration, you can approximate the state of the narrator and let action and dialogue fill out. So much happens in Howard's head that it forced me to be as accurate as possible.

Q. You are a writer who likes to revise and rework. Do you find that your creative writing students are resistant to this? Do they expect their work will come out of them fully formed?

A. One thing they all share is the misconception that the idea has to be fully formed in your head and then you download it. That it has to be thoroughly and utterly original. I remember laboring under that delusion as a student, and it's a terrible and frightening vision.

Rather than aiming for absolute originality, I tell my students, [you can] enter into a dialogue with the past. . . . To ask yourself, what can I contribute? It's a much more challenging and demanding and fertile exploration.

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