

A lesson in communication

By Regis Behe
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Sunday, January 23, 2005

Dave King co-owned a successful decorative painting business after a not-so-successful career as an artist when he decided to try another discipline, writing.

It wasn't as great a leap as one might think, at least for King.

"On some level, the division of art into disciplines is useful for the critic or connoisseur," says King, who lives in Brooklyn and has just published his first novel, "The Ha-Ha." "I think it's less useful to the artist. On some level, art-making is alike in every field. There are technical aspects you have to learn, and in my case, I think I'm a better writer than I was a painter, although I had a certain flair and virtuosity as a painter. But I'm able, for mysterious reasons, to go deeper as a writer."

Not that King was immediately successful. His first attempt at writing, a memoir based on a trip he took to Anchorage, Alaska, as a teenager, "was way beyond what I was capable of," he admits.

King eventually learned that the challenges of writing fiction -- managing time, dealing with memory, telling the truth, being precise -- were things he was good at, or at least liked. A couple of short stories were published, an agent was acquired, and "The Ha-Ha" -- about a Vietnam veteran, Howard Kapostash, who was severely injured by a landmine, can barely write his own name and cannot speak -- was conceived.

It took King seven years to finish, but not because he wasn't working. At one point, the author rewrote 50 pages in iambic pentameter, thinking it would be a nice touch if Howard's outward silence masked his inner poetry.

King decided he couldn't match the efforts of Lord Byron or Alfred Lord Tennyson. Instead, he concentrated on writing a conventional novel about a

Photo Gallery

[click to enlarge](#)



Dave King



"The Ha-Ha"

Details

'THE HA-HA'

Author: Dave King

Publisher: Little, Brown;
\$23.95; 352 pages

Tools

 [Print this article](#)

 [E-mail this article](#)

 [Subscribe to this paper](#)

 [Larger / Smaller Text](#)



character who has decidedly unconventional traits. Howard, who mows the lawns at a convent, lives with three roommates he hardly knows -- Laurel, Nit and Nat -- in his deceased parents' house. His high school girlfriend, Sylvia, a drug user, has to go into rehab and asks Howard to take care of her biracial son, Ryan.

It's not exactly a straightforward story, especially with a character who communicates only via hand gestures and grunts. King compared the task of writing a character without dialogue to writing a sonnet in that the demands of form and structure forced him to be ingenious and find a solution to Howard's inability to communicate easily.

"It was fascinating trying to figure out what the inside of Howard's head might be," he says.

There was also precedent in King's life for dealing with a person who had trouble communicating. His brother Hank, who died at 44, was autistic.

But King is not writing from personal experience in "The Ha-Ha."

"I think I have an interest in disability because of Hank," he says. "I think have an interest in language because I'm a writer and because of Hank. And maybe I have an understanding of how frustrating it is to deal with someone who really doesn't communicate at all. To a certain extent, that enabled me to develop the characters of Laurel and Nat and some of the other people, but the link to Howard is very tenuous. It really had to do with the fact that Howard acquired his disability and Hank was born with his. There couldn't be a bigger difference."

It's Ryan, Sylvia's child, who becomes the catalyst for action in the book. Initially hesitant to stay with Howard -- whom King draws as a hulking, near giant of a man -- he gradually insinuates himself into the fabric of Howard and his roommates' lives.

This type of transformation, King says, is normal.

"Anybody who needs you can act as an agent for change," King says. "You give a dog to a shut-in, and all of a sudden they have to care for something, and it makes a big difference."

"I think for Howard, it's a question of having someone to take care of. At the beginning of the book, he's saying, 'harrumph, harrumph, I'll feed him and get him to school.' Ultimately, and rather quickly, he realizes you don't draw the line on caring for someone."

ABOUT THAT TITLE ...

The title of Dave King's first novel, "The Ha-Ha," is not a veiled reference to the main character's silence. A ha-ha is a boundary wall concealed in a ditch so it doesn't block the scenery, a device that was used extensively by 18th-century landscape gardener Lancelot "Capability" Brown. A similar structure plays a significant role in the novel.

ON WRITING: DAVE KING

Dave King succeeded in publishing his first attempt at a novel, "The Ha-Ha," even though it took him seven years to complete. As a humanities teacher at the School of Visual Arts in New York -- he also teaches English at New York's Baruch College -- he tells his students to remain as open as possible to the imagination.

"I think one of the most difficult things for young artists to deal with is self-censoring," he says. "It was true for me. I had this notion that any idea I had had to exist complete in my head before I could download it onto the page, whether it was a drawing or a story. You think up the artwork full, and then you make it.

"But that's not the way it is. You think of something you can live with for a while. In my case, it was something I could live with for seven years."

CAPSULE REVIEW

Dave King's "The Ha-Ha" is the rare first novel that seems to have no literary precedent.

The story of a Vietnam veteran who communicates only through gestures and guttural sounds, King's book is alternately heartbreaking and redemptive. The character of Howard Kapostash is comparable to Yann Martel's Pi Patel ("Life of Pi") or Goto Dengo in Neal Stephenson's "Cryptonomicon" as a character with no literary forebears.

Regis Behe can be reached at rbehe@tribweb.com or (412)320-7990.



Images and text copyright © 2004 by The Tribune-Review Publishing Co.
Reproduction or reuse prohibited without written consent from
[PittsburghLIVE](http://PittsburghLIVE.com).