

Back Bay Readers' Pick

READING GROUP GUIDE

THE  
Ha-Ha

A NOVEL

DAVE KING

## A conversation with Dave King

**The author of *The Ha-Ha* talks with Danielle DeFrain of FictionAddiction.NET about the origins of his first novel**

Dave King has done it all. He's been an artist, a florist, a New York City cabdriver, a bartender, a small business owner, and even an editor. Now he's taken a successful leap into writing fiction with his debut novel, *The Ha-Ha*, and Warner Brothers Pictures will turn his book into a movie. FictionAddiction.NET talks with King about his creative past, his novel, and his take on the writing craft.

*You've had such a successful painting career and now it appears your writing is going to be equally flourishing. What made you finally decide to delve into the world of novel writing?*

To be honest, my painting career was a mixed bag. My undergraduate degree was in painting and film, and I was a serious painter for almost ten years — without too much success. During the end of that time a partner and I founded Dynaflow Studios, Inc. (now called Franklin Tartaglione, LLC) to create decorative painting and murals for high-end residences.

I enjoyed the decor world very much, and it's true we did well, but it's a different kind of creativity when you're pursuing a

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craft and delivering a commissioned product; I missed the freedom I'd enjoyed in the studio. Since I was already painting all day, I enrolled in a writing class as a creative outlet, and one of my first teachers, the wonderful novelist Melvin Jules Bukiet, encouraged me to consider graduate school.

After several years of writing on nights and weekends, I relinquished my portion of the decorative painting business and entered the MFA program at Columbia. *The Ha-Ha* (in quite a different form) was my master's thesis.

*The character of Howard Kapostash in The Ha-Ha is three-dimensional in his role as protagonist. He has such a convincing mixture of flaws and feelings, and you did an amazing job bringing him to life. What inspired you to choose him as the basis of your novel?*

My interest in disability is a consequence of having a profoundly autistic brother, but it's important to note that while my brother Hank (who died in 1993) certainly helped spark the character of Howard Kapostash, Howard is not an attempt to "give voice" to Hank's experience.

The two lives are substantively quite different, and one of the book's primary dynamics is the exploration of Howard's loss; since Howard, unlike Hank, has known the full range of a normally abled life, his rebirth as a disabled person encompasses the narrowing of every expectation for what we loosely term the American dream. With this knowledge of what might have been, Howard bears an extra burden of sadness I hope my brother never experienced.

*Child rearing is one of life's greatest challenges. With the difficulties that Howie already faced, why toss that into the mix?*

There are a number of reasons I included Ryan in the story, the first being that I enjoy writing about kids. Though we don't have children ourselves, *The Ha-Ha* was written during a happy period when

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my life was rich with children, especially my young nieces and nephew. They — and many children of friends — contributed immeasurably to the portrait of Ryan.

A second reason to build the story around Howard's time with Ryan was to raise the level of challenge for myself. The story of a damaged child and damaged adult who bond and find reconciliation is pretty classic and has already been told in a variety of ways (the foremost example in our American literature probably being *Huckleberry Finn*). I wanted to see if I could add something to this literature without allowing my book to become cheesy, predictable, or clichéd. Treading this line was one of the harder tasks I addressed in writing *The Ha-Ha*, and in fact the book follows fairly foreseeable lines for its first half before ultimately veering off in a direction that I hope will surprise most readers.

*Howard has been compared to some impressive characters of literature. How does it feel to have crafted someone who has touched the hearts and souls of so many?*

It's wonderful, and I never tire of hearing from readers. Among the most satisfying responses I've received have been many notes and e-mails from Vietnam vets and from those in the health care professions: employees of long-term care facilities, nurses, surgeons, even shrinks. An unexpected number of readers have had some experience of traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder, and it's been thrilling to earn the validation of those who have gone through challenges like the ones Howard faces in the novel.

*The Ha-Ha has received such high accolades and is already slated for film production. Did you ever imagine it would gain popularity so quickly?*

Frankly, I did not. During my graduate school days some professors and fellow students were intrigued by what I was up to, but there

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was certainly no consensus that this was a special project. That's primarily because it took me a long time to get it right.

Over the six years it took me to complete the novel, I wrote approximately five full drafts and rewrote problem scenes perhaps as many as twenty times, and while I was struggling with Howard's voice or the book's pacing or some other difficult aspects of *The Ha-Ha*, it wasn't at all clear I'd ever get it right. Only when the book began to be read by publishing professionals did I have an inkling of its wider appeal.

*Is there any one author who motivated your writing more than any other?*

E. M. Forster's influence is all over this book: so much of *The Ha-Ha* is about making the human connection, and Forster's own vision of writing as a moral activity is enormously important to me. But in working out how to capture Howard's consciousness, I also considered some of the twentieth-century modernists, particularly Faulkner and Woolf.

Despite the fact that *The Ha-Ha* is a mostly conventional narrative comprised of conventional sentences, the formal innovation of the voice — the sheer contradiction implied by the fact that the story is told by a mute — nevertheless owes a debt to others who have written from inside the human head. Among many other writers whose impact may be less evident in this novel but who matter greatly to me are Wharton, Cather, Beckett, Chekhov, and Whitman.

*You have such a diverse background in both your education and your career. Where do you see yourself going from here?*

I'm continuing to write. My novel-in-progress is tonally different from *The Ha-Ha* (among other shifts, the new book's narrative voice is more worldly and skeptical than Howard's), but the story will continue my investigation of themes that are important to me,

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including friendship and family, loyalty and betrayal, and the duties of the individual within a community.

I'm also continuing to write and publish my poetry.

*One of the more popular pieces of advice for aspiring authors is "write what you know." Do you agree with the importance placed on that?*

"Write what you know" is especially useful for new writers, who may feel that even beginning to write is a pretty big step. It's good for one's confidence to be sure of a subject, even if how to capture that subject in words remains elusive.

Ultimately, though, my method is to rely on my imagination, so the dictum "write what you know" becomes more elastic, more abstract. I feel I write what I know about life, about love, about human relationships and emotions and joy and sorrow, but in *The Ha-Ha* I made up the details of the town, the characters, and the plot. It was in the attempt to bring those two worlds together that my book took flight.

*What words of wisdom would you like to share with fledgling writers?*

Try taking a "good cop/bad cop" approach to your manuscript. In the first draft, be endlessly loving and supportive of yourself. Toss in anything you can think of; be optimistic, positive, and forgiving, and embrace digression. In the second draft, bring out your harsh and punitive side: look for flaws in the logic and force yourself to do plenty of heavy pruning. Take the long view: think fiercely about structure, pacing, story arc, theme, and other big issues. Your final draft, of course, will be some combination of the two.

The complete text of Danielle DeFrain's interview with Dave King originally appeared at FictionAddiction.NET. Reprinted with permission.

## Questions and topics for discussion

1. Why do you think the novel is called *The Ha-Ha*? Given the definition of a ha-ha — a kind of trick of the eye that conceals a break in the landscape — how do you think this relates to Howard's condition, or to the story as a whole?
2. How is the reader's experience of Howard Kapostash different from the way the other characters experience him? Is the first-person voice used differently in this novel from how it's used in other books?
3. Consider other novels that attempt to capture human consciousness — for example, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. How do you think the problem is handled differently in *The Ha-Ha*?
4. What's your impression of Sylvia? If the novel has a villain, she's probably it, but how would the story be different if it were told from her perspective? Do you think Dave King has been fair in his portrayal of the female characters?
5. As readers, we learn about Howard's rehabilitation only toward the end of the book (at the beginning of Part III). How does this affect the way you understand Howard's character? Would you have liked to know his history right up front? What is gained by the author's withholding of this information?

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6. How is the idea of family important to *The Ha-Ha*? What kinds of families appear in the course of the novel? Do you think the novel gives an accurate portrayal of the state of the American family today?
7. The *Chicago Tribune* described *The Ha-Ha* as a “novel that fits the definition of a true war story,” despite the brevity of the passages that actually describe war. Do you agree? What do you think is the definition of a true war story?
8. Do you see Timothy as a symbolic character or simply a plot element? If he’s a symbol, what does he represent? With regard to the plot, how do you reconcile Howard’s role in Timothy’s fate?
9. What do you think happens after the book ends? Discuss the various characters’ chances for happiness. Have they improved since the beginning of the novel?

## Suggestions for further reading

### Dave King recommends some of his favorite books

*A Room with a View* by E. M. Forster

As many readers have observed, Forster's influence is all over *The Ha-Ha*: in the primacy of the human connection; in the preference for sincerity over irony; and in the attempt to examine large truths through the lens of the domestic. I return again and again to Forster. I read *A Passage to India* for its magnificent moral scope, the unfairly neglected *The Longest Journey* for its ragged passion, and *Howards End* simply for the famous incantation "Only connect!" But for the purpose of this list I recommend *A Room with a View* because it is most like *The Ha-Ha* in terms of scale. Those who share my interest in Forster might also check out P. N. Furbank's wonderful *E. M. Forster: A Life*.

*The City of Your Final Destination* by Peter Cameron

I recommend Peter Cameron's novel in the same breath as *A Room with a View* because Cameron has managed an almost miraculous channeling of the Forster voice and conscience. Within this tale of a contemporary PhD candidate's search for a lost manuscript lies a profound examination of how easily we undervalue — and risk losing — love. Watch for the movie version, to be directed by James Ivory.

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*The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth

Some people know that I considered writing *The Ha-Ha* as a novel in verse. In contemplating the nature of Howard's interior voice, it struck me that none of us can really know the inside of another person's mind, and that writing Howard's narration as poetry might set off the difference between his inner and outer experience. I got about seventy pages into an iambic pentameter version of *The Ha-Ha* before returning to prose, but the experiment left its mark on Howard's narration. Vikram Seth actually did write a novel in verse, and *The Golden Gate* is playful, original, and even heartbreaking. Told entirely in sonnets, this book is compulsively readable, and the rhymes are delightful.

*5 Degrees and Other Poems* by Nicholas Christopher

One task I set myself when I entered graduate school was to grow more comfortable in the world of poetry. At Columbia, I read and wrote a lot of poems, and this collection, by the author of the novels *Veronica* and *A Trip to the Stars*, was one of the first poetry books I read straight through. The title series is a thirty-five-poem sequence on, of all things, extreme cold, with topics ranging from alchemy to the Arctic, van Gogh to Houdini. It's filled with beautiful observations, fascinating information, and elegantly turned lines.

*The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* by G. B. Edwards

Here's a novel absolutely unlike anything else you'll read. Reasons for recommending it, in no particular order: the miracle of its sustained voice; the remarkable French-English vernacular of a Channel Islands narrator; the vision of twentieth-century history seen through a small and particular lens; and the delicate emotional balance, a concoction of loneliness, exaltation, pragmatism, wistfulness, and wonder that never quite overflows in any of the above directions.

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*Death Comes for the Archbishop* by Willa Cather

Why isn't Willa Cather more regularly ranked among our foremost American writers? Is it because she's a woman? Is it because she's "regional"? Is it because her low-key storytelling and local dialect mask the grace and depth of her ambition? Cather *is* underappreciated, but this compelling book may offer a corrective to those readers familiar only with *My Antonia*. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is sweeping and expansive but also absolutely intimate.

*Great Plains* by Ian Frazier

During a period of creative uncertainty, Ian Frazier steadied himself by driving around the Plains states, pursuing history, uncovering arcana, and talking with apparently every person he met. This heartfelt, intuitive travelogue was both the result of his driving and the solution to his uncertainty, and though there are many reasons to love *Great Plains*, I particularly appreciate the investigation of joy. And yes, it's the same Frazier who sometimes publishes humor in *The New Yorker*.

*The Quiet American* by Graham Greene

Long before I began work on *The Ha-Ha* I was an avid reader of Vietnam War literature. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, Thom Jones's *The Pugilist at Rest*, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon*, and many other books constitute some of our most noble responses to the catastrophe that was Vietnam. Graham Greene's remarkable *The Quiet American*, published in 1955, anticipates that moral and political quagmire with a clairvoyance that was criticized at the time but now seems nothing short of uncanny.

*The Dog of the Marriage* by Amy Hempel

Amy Hempel is another writer I reread regularly, and her 2005 collection is stunning. No one crafts extremely short fiction more elegantly than Hempel, but *The Dog of the Marriage* contains several pieces that extend her customarily brief narratives in unexpected

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and gratifying ways. This book is more frankly physical than her previous work, and the possibility of eros sits well with her remarkable wit, insight, and sudden pathos. Read this book, then go back and read her other three, too.

*A Wild Sheep Chase* by Haruki Murakami

Of all the authors on this list, Murakami is hardest to pin down. Why is he so thoroughly, dependably satisfying? His heroes are likeable but often affectless, and his works regularly strain credulity — in fact, they delight in straining credulity. Murakami is interested in cats and pop culture and history and drinking and paradox and lost love. Maybe those are the ingredients of great storytelling, or maybe Murakami's managed something so thoroughly original that you have to read it to understand its charm.