

finalists for the 1994 Prix de Rome given by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and **House of Sand and Fog** was a finalist for the 1999 National Book Award for Fiction.

Andre Dubus III is the son of Andre Dubus, a widely recognized master of short fiction who died in 1999. He teaches in Emerson College's MFA in writing program, and at Tufts University. He lives in Newburyport, Massachusetts, with his wife, dancer/choreographer Fontaine Dollas, and their three children.

(randomhouse.com)

An Interview with the Author

First off, I must say how much I thought of your father, as a writer and a man.

Me, too. Thanks, I really miss him.

What was it like growing up in your household, with a writer for a father?

Well, like most kids, I didn't pay attention to what my dad did. I just wasn't interested. My dad and mom divorced when I was around ten, and I didn't live with him after that, though he was close by and we saw each other weekly. I wasn't really aware that he was a writer; I didn't start reading his writing until I was about fifteen. It occurred to me then that my dad was kind of special; he's still one of my favorite writers. I grew up in a pretty working-class neighborhood, and my friends didn't have a lot of books in their houses, though I did. And though I didn't pick up a lot of those books off of the shelf, I grew up knowing that it was part of a full life.

Is being a writer something that you always aspired to, or did you have an epiphany at some point in your life?

I did have an epiphany, I actually aspired to do something quite different. I got a degree in sociology, didn't read much fiction in college, and I was a pretty political, left-wing type of guy. I wanted to do some kind of work in social change and make things better for the poor man, and I was very romantic and passionate about it. I was a Ph.D. candidate in Marxist social science at Madison, and I took a year off and worked construction and trained for the Golden Gloves. That sounds a lot more impressive than it actually is. I was doing well, and then I got my butt kicked by this big white guy with a beard who looked like he sat on a barstool all day long. At the same time, I was dating a girl who was taking a writing class. She had a crush on this writer and I was really jealous. She would come back from these workshops all flushed in the face, and I read one of his stories, prepared to hate it and tear it apart, and it was beautiful. It was a gorgeous little story, and I was inspired. I had a crush on him at that point, too. So I started writing that summer, finished a story that wasn't very good, but I was hooked. It was kind of epiphanous. I didn't know if it was any good, but I went for a long drive and

YOUR KIRKWOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY

314-821-5770 www.kpl.lib.mo.us

all of a sudden everything looked clear to me and I knew that I had to keep doing this, no matter what I did.

You've had an interesting career path, working as a carpenter, actor, private investigator, teacher, bartender, and bounty hunter. How did these experiences shape your perspective of the world and contribute to your writing?

I can't sit still! I think a lot of that is actually misleading. The bounty hunter/private investigator gig was just a six-month deal in my twenties. Many people would think that I came to writing late because I had been doing these other jobs, but I chose these jobs because they were at night which gave me mornings free to write, and because they were people jobs and I love and am interested in people far more than things. So, to answer your question, I think they've given me a wide range of experience, which is helpful, although I don't believe we have to go out and live all of these adventures in order to write well. That's really a romantic notion. I think the imagination knows it all already and we can put ourselves in the shoes of another and just do our research. On the other hand, experience never hurt a writer either, and if you can get it you might use it someday.

How difficult was it to write in two voices that are so different from one another--a woman who is a recovering alcoholic and an Iranian woman? Both characters seem a far cry from you.

It was very challenging. I was scared to death of writing from the point of view of an Iranian. I had written from a woman's point of view before and I know that people get flack. I think that knee-jerk reaction misses the point. The job description for the author is to imagine the lives of others. I found it hard to find the voice of the Colonel, though I wasn't making it all up because I had spent time with Iranians and immersed myself in the culture. The difficult part was finding his sound, and for awhile I was judging him as the bad guy, because the Shah's regime was bad. But he wouldn't show up when I did that. There's that great line from Hemingway, "The job of the writer is not to judge, but to seek to understand." And so as soon as I stopped judging he showed up. When I was writing from his point of view, I was on his side, and when I was writing as Kathy, I was on her side.

I gave the book to my neighbor, who is of Iranian descent and grew up in the Bay area, and she was blown away by how accurately you nailed the Iranian character and couldn't understand how you knew so much about the culture.

Music to my ears! The truth is, whether it's Iranian or not, I do believe that what's so exciting and terrifying about the writing process is that it really is an act of exploration and discovery. With all of us, not just writers, there is a sort of knowledge of the other. We have a lot more in common than we realize, and I think writing is really a sustained act of empathy.

How did you go about researching Iranian culture?

I didn't do a lot of research. I did more research on Lester than any other part of the book. I was in love with an Iranian girl in college and spent three years with her and her family, and they didn't speak any English. I'd go over to their house and eat their food

and listen to their music, and I absorbed a lot of it through osmosis. That relationship eventually fell apart and I ended up going to the University of Texas and an Iranian lived in the co-op I lived in, and he spoke no English. Because I knew a few words of Persian, we befriended each other. Every Friday afternoon we went to an outdoor beer garden and I'd teach him English and he'd reciprocate the following week by teaching me Persian. And after about a year I was just about conversational. And with this book, I didn't write myself into areas about which I was completely ignorant. I stayed within the parameters of what I was pretty sure I knew.

The Colonel has a dark view of Americans to begin with, and it's reinforced by his experiences with Kathy. Were you just being true to the character, or were you trying to make a statement about Western or American culture?

I was trying to be true to the character, and I do think he saw us that way. There's that great line from Flannery O'Connor, where she said, "Our beliefs are not what we see, but the light by which we see." I do think, having spent time with people from Latin American and Asian cultures, that we have it awfully easy here and I think that as a result, sometimes our character is lacking. Which is a terrible thing to say, because who wants to suffer to get it. But I think that may be the only way you do get it. I try not to ever make a point with my writing, and if I do it kills the fiction. I try to just capture the texture, because I don't have the answers. But, the fact is, I tend to agree with the Colonel on how infantile we can sometimes be. We're very materialistic and interested in instant gratification. I'm a lot more tolerant than he is, and I certainly don't pull myself out of the crowd.

This story was inspired partly by true events. Can you tell me about the genesis and development of the novel?

A lot of times with my fiction I can't trace the roots, but with this one I can. I was teaching a writing class at Emerson College, trying to get these students going, and I get great ideas from the newspaper. Usually the local news section has fragmented stories and one of these stories was about a woman who had been evicted from her house for failure to pay taxes she did not owe, and the county realized its mistake and were willing to rescind the sale, but the new owner wouldn't. And I thought, "Wow, that's a great one. Someone ought to write that." And my friend from college, her father was an Iranian colonel and he did know the Shah, and they did terrible things. I remember seeing him fumble in the United States, couldn't find a job, and ended up working at a convenience store. This was a man who used to be standing with kings and queens. And I thought that was incredibly dramatic. I took a few stabs at writing about him; I think I wrote a poem about him. The way it actually came together was, I took another look at the newspaper clipping and the man who bought the house had a Middle Eastern name, and I thought, "What if that was my Colonel?" And then four years later, there's the book.

People seem to have very different reactions to the book and the characters. Are you aware of that, and was this your intention?

I like the ambivalent responses, because I try to make the characters real. None of us are black and white. A friend of mine, who is an acting teacher, says, "None of us are just one note; we are all a symphony." We're also a cacophony. I would prefer people to look at it that way than to easily identify the villain and the good guy. I don't look at the world that way.

As readers get caught up in the intertwining storylines, we can't help but hope that the characters will make the right decisions, but they never do. Their lives are completely out of control. Did you develop these characters with this in mind, or did their self-destruction evolve naturally?

Believe me, I did not want to write a tragedy. I've got little kids; I don't want them reading this stuff. I did not know that Kathy had a problem with alcohol, I believed her when she said it was a cocaine problem and when she started drinking I thought a little wine wasn't going to hurt. And then it started escalating in the writing. I really felt like a helpless witness to the last part of the book. I would have preferred to have written a more hopeful book, though I think there's great value to tragic stories. As a matter of writing philosophy, if there is one, I try not to ever plot a story. I try to write it from the character's point of view and see where it goes.

With which character does your sympathy lie?

Well, all of them would be the true answer, but I have a soft spot for the Colonel. I found myself caring more about him, and maybe as a father I relate to him the most.

What do you love most about writing?

I think what I love most is that feeling that you really nailed something. I rarely feel it with a whole piece, but sometimes with a line you feel that it really captured what it is that you had inside you and you got it out for a stranger to read, someone who may never love you or meet you, but he or she is going to get that experience from that line.

What do you as a writer take away from the experience of writing this novel that took you four years to complete? It has to be like giving birth to child that you've been carrying inside you for so long.

It is, and I still feel parental towards it. I run long distances, and whereas before I was maybe a strong eight-mile runner, now I can run fifteen. I found a stamina that I don't know if I had before, and frankly, I'm still recuperating. I don't know if I've gotten my wind back yet.

Who are some of your influences, literary and otherwise?

I'm a big Bruce Springsteen fan. And Bob Dylan; as a kid I didn't listen to rock, I listened to Bob Dylan. And I get inspired a lot going to museums. I do think that some of the best writing of the past thirty years is being written right now, though.

What's next for you?

I've been working towards something, but who knows what it will be. I'm one of those writers who can't talk about what they're working on. The entire four years I was writing *House of Sand and Fog*, my wife never saw a word of it. I just have to keep it in the womb, and then everyone can have a crack at it.

(randomhouse.com)

Reviews

"Dubus writes gorgeous prose with a nourish edge, holding his readers spellbound as hope and love are lost in fog and buried in sand."—*Booklist Review*

"In his second novel (after *Bluesman*, LJ 5/15/93), the son of noted writer Andre Dubus manages to get deep inside the heads of two very different characters who clash over a modest house in the San Francisco suburbs. . . . Dubus's attention to detail and realistic prose style give the narrative a hard-edged, cinematic quality, but unlike many movies, its outcome is unexpected."—*Library Journal Review*

"Dubus offers in detail the unraveling life of a woman who, in her undoing, brings devastation to the families of those in her path. . . . No villains here, but only precisely rendered proof that the road to hell is paved with good intentions." — *Kirkus Review*

Examines what happens when ordinary men and women move across the tenuous barrier between the normal and the irrational....a story...about how people...are repeatedly trapped by circumstances and transformed..." - Bill Sharp, *New York Times Book Review*

Further Reading

God is a Bullet by Boston Teran

Beachglass by Wendy Blackburn

Thicker Than Blood by Penny Rudolph

Speak Now by Kaylie Jones

(novelistplus.com)

YOUR KIRKWOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY

314-821-5770 www.kpl.lib.mo.us

BOOK CLUB To Go!

House of Sand and Fog

By Andre Dubus

Possible Discussion Questions

1. With whom do you sympathize more in part one of the novel – Kathy Nicolo or Colonel Behrani? How does Dubus's use of alternating first-person narratives affect your response to, and involvement with, the characters?
2. The contested ownership of the house on Bisgrove Street is the fulcrum of the novel's plot. Who, in your opinion, owns the house once Behrani has paid cash for it? What would be a fair solution to the conflict?
3. Early in the novel Behrani buys himself a hat, which he says gives him "the appearance of a man with a sense of humor about living, a man who is capable to live life for the living of it" [p. 28]. Why is this a poignant thing for Behrani to wish for himself?
4. What does Kathy's response to Nick's desertion reveal about her character? Why does Lester fall in love with Kathy? Is he better for her than Nick was?
5. Lester tells Kathy that he had wanted to become a teacher, but plans changed when Carol became pregnant. How well does Lester's job in law enforcement fit who he is? Why did he once plant evidence in a domestic violence case?
6. Of the three main characters, who is most complex? Who is most straightforward?
7. Where does the hostility between Lester and Behrani spring from? How do their memories--Lester's of his teenage girlfriend and her brother and Behrani's of his murdered cousin, Jasmeen--function to reveal the deep emotions that motivate action in this novel?
8. At what point do Kathy's and Lester's actions depart from the path of a simple desire for justice and move into something else?
9. Who among the three – Kathy, Lester or Behrani – act rationally?
10. Why does Lester drink – to break free of a sense of deadness, to anesthetize himself or some other reason?
11. Why does Lester risk his family life as well as his professional life for his involvement with Kathy – to reinvigorate his life or to destroy himself?

12. Note the epigraph to the novel, from "The Balcony" by Octavio Paz: "Beyond myself/ somewhere/ I wait for my arrival." How does it apply to the problems of self and alienation in each of the three main characters? Who has the clearest sense of his or her identity? What does it mean to have a clear sense of self?
13. Describing the success of her recovery program, Kathy says, "I had already stopped wanting what I'd been craving off and on since I was fifteen, for Death to come take me the way the wind does a dried leaf out on its limb" [p. 46]. How does the novel affect your response to the social and psychological issues of addiction, depression, and suicide?
14. How would you describe Behrani's wife, Nadereh? What qualities does she have that the others are missing?
15. Behrani tells his son, "Remember what I've told you of so many Americans: they are not disciplined and have not the courage to take responsibility for their actions. If these people paid to us the fair price we are asking, we could leave and she could return. It is that simple. But they are like little children, son. They want things only their way" [p. 172]. How accurate is his perception of Americans? How well does it apply to Kathy and Lester?
16. How does **House of Sand and Fog** highlight the conflict between downwardly mobile Americans and upwardly mobile recent immigrants? What role does prejudice play in the reaction of Americans and foreigners to each other?
17. Why has Kathy avoided telling her mother and brother the truth about her situation? How far does their meeting at the end of the novel help to resolve any of Kathy's difficult feelings about her place in the family?
18. Should Behrani be held responsible, on some level, for the crimes and excesses of the Shah's regime? Is he responsible for Esmail's fate?
19. Why does Behrani put on his military uniform at the climax of the novel?
20. What do you find most disturbing about the novel's denouement? If you find yourself imagining an alternate ending, what would that ending be?

(randomhouse.com)