

Tip Sheet – R.B. Young

Sample Q&A

1. ***Crimes of Disrespect* has three main characters: a Mohawk teen, a white ex-con janitor, and a black police detective. What unites these contrasting individuals?**

Respect, or lack thereof, is the novel's theme. All three main characters—Pamela, Sol, and Alison—are struggling for respect or self-respect. First, as a scholarship student at an elite private school, Pamela Renard wants to be accepted and appreciated for her Mohawk heritage. (She's half French-Canadian.) Second, Sol Fitzgerald, an alcoholic ex-con janitor at Pamela's school, looks subconsciously for self-respect: as a child, he faced sexual abuse. Third Alison Downey, a black detective in the Halton Region Police, faces veiled contempt from her largely male, white colleagues. But Alison is also fighting for self-acceptance as a no-longer young woman. These characters' subplots echo the overall theme symbolized in the Two Row Wampum—two parties agreeing to peace, friendship, and respect.

2. **Why did you—a non-Indigenous Canadian—include the Grand River land dispute in this novel?**

Several First Nations people have told me the Caledonia/Grand River dispute is a hot potato I'd be better to avoid writing about. So, the short answer is I couldn't help myself. In 2006, when I heard news reports of the fist fights, rock throwing, and arrests at Caledonia, I was puzzled. And my ignorance bothered me, because I lived only a one-and-a-half hour drive from Six Nations, south of Brantford, Ontario. That was the emotional spur.

Intellectually, I like to think—and I may be deluded—that *Crimes of Disrespect* brings readers a fictionalized snapshot of contemporary Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada published its final reports by 2015, yet here we are in the next decade and still the Grand River land dispute goes on. I'd not be surprised if similar unresolved land issues remain in pockets across the country. As an artist, I have no answers; I merely wanted to make up a story about this aspect of present-day Canada.

3. **What authority do you have to write in the point-of-view an 18-year-old First Nations woman?**

First Nations representation in the arts is—for good reason—a sensitive issue. However:

- Pamela Renard (the Mohawk teenager in my novel) is only one of three POV characters who together build the novel. The story is not hers alone but a bigger whole.

- I'm agnostic, but genetically I'm half Ashkenazi Jew. A budding neo-Nazi happened to be in my Grade Eight homeroom, and our interactions marked me for life. However, I heard recently about the German novelist Rachel Seiffert, whose grandparents were Nazis: her novel *A Boy in Winter*, set in 1941, has a Jewish POV character. I find hope in Seiffert's bravery as a writer: I think fiction can heal.
- I believe that any novelist—if they have an empathetic mind and enough research—can write about anything and anyone. Admittedly, a writer's identity matters and should colour any reader's experience. But I'm with the American author Ayad Akhtar, a Pulitzer Prize winner of Pakistani-Muslim extraction: he thinks representation has ousted, wrongly, art in literary criticism. Akhtar puts it this way: "I've spent my whole life trying to tell a good story, not, how do I do the 'right thing' in terms of the politics of how I represent the people I'm representing." (*The Globe and Mail*, 14 Nov 2020)

4. Who are your favorite writers?

I'm a fan of psychological crime fiction with literary punch. So, my favourites include Andrew Taylor, Denise Mina, Barbara Vine (aka Ruth Rendell), and Megan Abbott. Taylor's *Bleeding Heart Square* is narrated through three alternating types of viewpoint: diary entries in second person ("you"), the diary of another character written in first person ("I"), and third person ("she") for yet another character. Both Mina (in *The End of the Wasp Season*) and Abbott (in *The Fever*) do their characters' psychology so well, disorienting and misdirecting the reader. (Misdirection is key in a satisfying mystery or suspense novel.) Finally, Barbara Vine, in *A Fatal Inversion*, does pretty much everything well: character, description, subtle foreshadowing (some of which I got only on second reading), and a simmering suspense plot. These books may influence my writing; they certainly entertained and moved me.

I've gotten lazy since school, when I devoured literary classics. But occasionally a literary masterpiece blows me away. For example, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is a tour de force of first-person voice (a butler's in this case) and an emotionally repressed, unreliable narrator. I've also just heard about a classic, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), which is probably the first post-apocalyptic novel, with the humanity's end produced by . . . a pandemic. How prescient is that!

5. Where do you get your ideas?

As opposed to the seat-of-your-pants type of novelist, I'm an outliner. However, I proceed intuitively and subconsciously to get story ideas. Actually, "get" is the wrong word: writing ideas *come* to me, sometimes quite slowly. They usually percolate and mix over months or longer, depending on the particular story. So, I'm with Stephen King, who has written that writing stories is like archeology: you're digging up something that *already exists* in the ground. It's there, and the writer begins with a backhoe and proceeds from there to shovel, chisel, and brush. Or think of it like sculpting stone.

6. Why did you choose to self-publish?

Three factors set me toward self-publishing *Crimes of Disrespect*:

- i. Technology. The technologies for graphics, publishing text, and book distribution have progressed and integrated in the last 20 years or so. In terms of cover design and text layout, it's hard nowadays to tell whether a book is traditionally or self-published. And, while no gatekeepers exist for self-publishing (by definition), the *literary* quality of an average self-published novel has, on the whole, improved too. Professional groups like the Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi), headquartered in London, now exist to advise, educate and campaign for independent authors.
- ii. Transferable Skills. Notwithstanding the technological advancements, a large factor in my decision to self-publish was my work background in web design and digital imaging. I was thus able to design and produce the book cover—vs. hiring a freelancer at \$1,500 or more.
- iii. Publishing's Falling Sky. I spent the better part of two years querying agents and publishers, from Penguin to the smallest independent. A couple of agents expressed interest but in the end passed on *Crimes of Disrespect*. Having been published by literary journals and in a short-fiction anthology, I know I have at least modest writing talent. But in publishing, the sky continues to fall, as it were. The traditional business model remains under pressure from big box retailers, e-books, and of course Amazon. Which means that, like the record industry, publishers no longer have midlist artists. (*Midlist* refers to "books which are not bestsellers but are strong enough to economically justify their publication." –Wikipedia.) No longer will publishers foster the career of a new writer by publishing their first novel (and possibly second and third). Of course, it's different for grant-based literary publishers, but I'm talking about the commercial fiction market.