

ABOUT THE BOOK

Avery Walker goes to a college party, much as she has done during the last three years. As a senior, this is old hat: drink, hang with the girls, flirt with the guys, and maybe hook up. But what begins for Avery as another mindless night out ends up being mind-altering, life altering. Her brief, even violent, connection with performance artist and visiting lecturer Grant Danko shatters her view of her world. Indeed, when he has left her home and she tries to return to the routine that was her college days, she can't. The silly competitions among the girls, the rote academics, the puppy-like behavior of her sweet male friends. Nothing satisfies, and Avery realizes that nothing quite has. For years. Not since her father died has her world felt right. So she leaves, suddenly, on the back of Grant's motorcycle, aiming for Brooklyn and a career in the arts, which perhaps he might help her shape. She hasn't really thought everything through. Nor has Grant. He has a criminal past, a faltering career, and an empty future. He thinks it's a lark, her following him home. Except that he quickly realizes she is stronger, brighter than he had ever thought. A better person than he could ever hope to be. But he does hope.

Avery's mother, Kate—still grieving the passing of her husband and harboring a festering secret—is appalled that Avery would leave college midway through her senior year. She compels her brother-in-law and sister-in-law to travel to New York with her and to help her reach out to Avery, who has stopped taking her calls. They carry more grief among them than each knows: a secret affair, an undiminished grief over lost family members, the growing alarm that one has simply lost one's way, forgone one's dreams.

In New York, worlds collide. Avery, Grant, and Kate—indeed all the characters—must reconsider their lives and make important choices.

In Edward Falco's searing but hopeful new novel, the connection and clash between Avery and Grant becomes the catalyst for examining not just how individual lives and hearts are affected by abandonment and violence but how that violence permeates families and affects the culture at large. Falco has often used his fiction as a way for us to look at our worst and most violent impulses, both to understand what drives us toward poor choices as well as what gives us hope for redemption. Here, more than in any of his previous work, Falco gives his characters a larger stage and shows the kinds of connections that sustain us, even the most unexpected ones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edward Falco's new novel, *Saint John of the Five Boroughs*, is forthcoming from Unbridled Books in October. His most recent books are *Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha: New and Selected Stories*, from Unbridled Books (2005); *Wolf Point*, a novel, also from Unbridled (2005) and *In the Park of Culture*, a collection of short fictions from The University of Notre Dame Press (2005). His earlier works include

the novel *Winter in Florida* (Soho, 1990), the hypertext novel, *A Dream with Demons* (Eastgate Systems, 1997), the hypertext poetry collection, *Sea Island* (Eastgate Systems, 1995), and a chapbook of prose poem, *Concert in the Park of Culture* (Tamarack, 1985), as well as two collections of short stories: *Acid* (Notre Dame, 1996) and *Plato at Scratch Daniel's & Other Stories* (University of Arkansas Press, 1990).

Acid won the 1995 Richard Sullivan Prize from the University of Notre Dame, and was a finalist for *The Patterson Prize*. He has won a number of other prizes and awards for his writing, including a 2008 NEA Fellowship in fiction, a 2009 Virginia Commission for the Arts Fellowship in playwriting, the Emily Clark Balch Prize for Short Fiction from *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, The Robert Penn Warren Prize in Poetry from *The Southern Review*, The Mishima Prize for Innovative Fiction from *The Saint Andrews Review*, a Dakin Fellowship from the Sewanee Writers' Conference, two Individual Artist's Fellowships from the Virginia Commission for the Arts, and The Governor's Award for the Screenplay from The Virginia Festival of American Film.

His stories have been published widely in journals, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Playboy*, and *TriQuarterly*, *The Missouri Review*, and collected in the Best American Short Stories, the Pushcart Prize, and several anthologies.

An early innovator in the field of digital writing, Falco's literary and experimental hypertexts are taught in universities internationally.

He lives in Blacksburg, Virginia, where he is the director of Virginia Tech's MFA program, and he edits *The New River*, an online journal of digital writing.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

How is this novel different from your previous work?

I think *Saint John of the Five Boroughs* is my most ambitious novel. In my short stories, I typically concentrate on a single character at a significant moment in his or her life. My last novel, *Wolf Point*, has four important characters, but it concentrates on only one of them, Tom “T” Walker. In that sense, *Wolf Point* is similar to my short stories. *Saint John*, however, has multiple storylines and several important characters. I feel like I stretched some in *Saint John*, both in terms of style and in the breadth of the story I wanted to tell.

Much of your writing speaks to the effects of violence on people's lives. Do you feel discussing violence is all the more important now, with our being at war?

Approximately 200 million dead in twentieth century wars, and many times that number psychologically crippled or destroyed by the effects of war. And the twenty-first century is not off to a good start. So, yes, war and the effects of war should be a pressing issue for all of us—but in my fiction the issue usually translates into an exploration of characters who perpetrate or suffer acts of violence. In *Saint John* I am, in part, trying to explore the way acts of violence disrupt and distort characters' lives. The first section of the novel is titled “Blasted,” and at first that appears to allude to the heavy drinking going on at the start of the story. I hope that some readers, however, will notice that the events described in that section are responsible for blasting the principal characters out of their

ordinary lives. One character's younger brother is killed in Iraq, while another character has a violent sexual encounter that leads to a public humiliation. The novel follows these characters as the trajectories of their lives are warped by the effects of that violence. The title character, Grant Danko, aka Saint John of the Five Boroughs, had the trajectory of his life seemingly inalterably warped many years earlier, as the result of a single, deadly act of violence. I hope that the story suggests connections between violence on the personal level and violence on the state-sanctioned level. I also hope the choices made by Grant Danko might suggest something about the possible choices everyone faces in a world where violence, personal and societal, is endemic.

Do you consider this a New York novel? How important is place to your prose?

The novel is largely set in Brooklyn, New York—but it's certainly not *about* Brooklyn or New York, and so I would say, no, it's not a New York novel. I need a solid sense of place when writing, because I need a vividly imagined world for my characters to inhabit. Beyond that, setting has subtle influences on every other aspect of a story, from character to plot and theme. In *Saint John*, the highly competitive world of the arts in New York City overlaps with the world of organized crime in the person of Grant Danko, who sees himself as an artist while he earns a living as part of a criminal enterprise. At the very least, in the case of Grant Danko, the story suggests that being a criminal has the potential of getting in the way of being an artist. More subtly (at least a little more subtly) it suggests that allying yourself with violent enterprises just might thwart your chances as an artist.

Do you consider your work at all political? Is this book a cultural critique and if so what change do you hope to effect?

I think all writing is political. The form a writer chooses, the aesthetics adopted, the subject matter explored—all of that has political implications. I do not consider myself a didactic or polemical writer. I have no interest in teaching anyone a lesson or convincing anyone of anything. I try in all my writing to explore subjects that are important to me on several levels, one level of which is the larger, seemingly exterior world of politics and culture. I am especially interested in how what happens in the personal lives of individuals reflects and influences the larger culture, and how what happens in the larger culture reflects and influences the interior lives of individuals.

The artist's life, as depicted in your novel, is not attractive and certainly not glamorous. Do you think the art world—and the larger world of artists and performers—is in fact nasty? What about the literary and publishing world?

I love the artist's life, if by that we mean a life that revolves around making art and being part of a community of artists. I'm not so crazy about the competitiveness and jealousy that is a part of the business of art, with its commodification and merchandising, its hype and hoopla. I think Mei Mei, the most superficially successful of the artists in *Saint John*, is self-centered, mean-spirited, jealous, and heartlessly competitive—and all of those unfortunate traits can be linked to a spirit that fully embraces the business of art.

Do you consider this a dark love story?

The relationship between Grant and Avery starts out as something disturbing and certainly dark, before it settles into a turbulent connection that's full of deception and, as I see it, a mutual superficiality. They are both using each other and neither of them is in the least committed to each other or to the relationship. Grant never expected Avery to stay with him for more than a few weeks, and Avery goes to Brooklyn with him primarily because she can't stand to go back to her old life. By the end of the story, though, the relationship seems to have changed once again, into something that perhaps has potential--and the cause of that, I think, is the choice Grant makes that alters his life. By the end of the novel, Grant is for the first time being honest with Avery, and perhaps himself, and that, as I see it, is why there's potential in the relationship.

This book is laced with betrayals. Do you see betrayals as a kind of violence, or a precursor to violence?

How do we know what to do, what guides us, what's at work in the decisions we make (instantaneous decisions, for example, like picking up a nearby gun when threatened, or like responding sexually to a woman who happens to be your sister-in-law), why do we do the things we do? These are some of the big questions that were in my mind throughout the writing of *Saint John*. Early in the novel, Grant asks Avery what she believes, and she can't come up with an answer. Late in the novel, Avery asks Grant the same question, and he answers "nothing." I think of the betrayals in *Saint John* as symptomatic of a much deeper confusion.

Grant Danko's character first made a minor appearance in one of your short stories. What about this character made you want to revisit him?

Saint John of the Five Boroughs turns up briefly in "Acid" as a performance artist who, we're told, uses a bible and a crucifix in his act. Among the few things we know about him in that short story is that he dumped his girlfriend when she started talking about marriage. I suppose I found him interesting and worth exploring, and I'm pretty sure the superficial picture of a cad in religious garb is what interested me.

What's next?

I'm finishing up a new collection of short stories called *Burning Man*, and working with the local theater community on a production of *The Center*, a new play. In time, most likely, I'll start on another novel.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Whose story is this?
2. Is this a love story?

3. What does this novel say about family and the importance of family?
4. There are lots of betrayals in this book and also violence. What does this novel say about forgiveness? Redemption?
5. The life of the artist as depicted in this novel is certainly less than glamorous. In our age of celebrity, how does this make you re-evaluate artists of all stripes, both what they contribute and at what cost?
6. Part of this novel is about people reconnecting with their best selves, about becoming who they always thought they would be. What do you think the chances are that Avery, Grant, and others will succeed?
7. How important is place to this story?
8. Abandonment has had devastating effects on the lives of several characters. What kinds of abandonment have occurred in this story? Is any one more manageable than the next?
9. What does this novel say about mothers?
10. Why do you think Falco chose the title that he did?

OTHER READING

Wolf Point by Edward Falco

Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha: New & Collected Stories by Edward Falco

The work of Richard Ford

The work of Russell Banks