

Descriptive Autobiography for John Vanderslice

There are several distinct influences that I know helped form me, for better or worse. Being raised Irish-Catholic, for instance. Being the middle kid in a family with eight children. Being raised in a house with towering bookshelves that were never not crammed full with potential reading material. Being raised with a college professor father and a master's degree mother. Being raised with a father who was also an alcoholic. Being a child during the 60s and 70s, prior to the internet, punk rock, the New Right, Ronald Reagan (sort of), George W. Bush, 9/11, Donald Trump, video games, cable television, personal computers, Uber, and so much more. Maybe most of all, being raised literally in the woods. My parents were both city people, born and bred, but whether because they were simply sick of civilization or were swept up in the "back to nature" vibe of the 60s, they decided when I was young to leave the conventional DC suburb where we lived and build a home in the middle of five acres in a densely forested section of southern Maryland. Oh, not that we didn't have neighbors. We did. But you couldn't see their houses, and you had to hike up a dirt road to get to them. My siblings and I walked (no exaggeration, I promise) a mile to the bus stop every day, and then had to rumble along isolated country roads for another half-hour before we arrived at our Catholic elementary school several towns away.

But growing up in the country, specifically rural southern Maryland, indelibly shaped my imaginative life and my sense of place. I haven't lived there in decades, but southern Maryland is the only place that has ever really felt like home to me, that has left its mark on my heart. But it also left its mark on my mental and writing life. No kidding, I must have walked hundreds of miles of lonely blacktops and tree-lined dirt roads as a kid, and that alone, apart from anything I read, fired my imagination. It gave me the time, the place, and the occasion to flex my fancy. (Remember, this was pre-handheld electronic devices.) The other thing is that I thoroughly absorbed the landscape of the place; it got into my blood and my memory in a way that still affects my writing. I would never want to lose that.

My Catholic education continued into high school, when I attended the decidedly middle-brow DeMatha High School in Hyattsville, Maryland. (You might know it because of its legendary basketball program.) I traded lonely country walks for long drives over the crowded DC beltway. That was different, but not better. I did all the Catholic teen stuff like CYO; I made good grades; I didn't date enough, or, really, hardly at all; I discovered prog rock, especially the band Yes; I wrote bad sci-fi in secret; I flirted with the idea of studying science in college (like my two older brothers) until I realized that doing so would have been a disaster. I finally graduated and moved on to my first secular educational institution: the University of Virginia. I attended UVA with the dogged determination to be an English major and train myself as a creative writer. (There were no creative writing degrees at the time.) I did exactly that, but I can attest that when I received my BA in 1983, I needed a hell of a lot more training.

After college, I worked a string of unsatisfying jobs in the DC metro area (see my note about the background of my story "Before") until it got through my thick head that maybe I should go back to school. I applied and was accepted into the MFA program at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Those were five busy but deeply educational years. I went part-time for a while and then full-time; I wrote a hell of a lot of fiction and poetry; I learned for the first time how to write a half-decent critical essay; I took an amazing class on the films of Orson Welles; I met my future wife in a class taught by Richard Bausch; and I earned my first bit of teaching experience. This was at a high school in DC that was both Catholic and military. The less said about that experience the better. Let's just say it was a trial by fire. But I also, a couple years later, had the opportunity to teach part-time at both GMU and Northern Virginia Community College. These experiences were, unlike my high school one, deeply gratifying and quite formative. I left my MFA program determined not just to keep writing and to eventually publish but to pursue a career in higher education. That was new.

Well, in the DC area if you spit you are likely to hit someone with a master's degree, so it quickly became obvious to me that if I had any hope of becoming anything other than an adjunct, I needed to get a Ph.D. asap. That decision led both me and my new wife (a.k.a. Stephanie Vanderslice) to travel to Cajun Louisiana, where we both pursued Ph.D.s in English—with creative dissertations—from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. Those were the best four

years of my life. I loved living in Cajun country. We ate great food; we met some great friends; we attended a slew of festivals; we wrote a ton; we breathed easier being away from the rushed atmosphere of DC; I published my first short story; I read both critical and creative work at multiple professional conferences; I got much better—as both a fiction writer and scholar; and, most important, our first son was born. Talk about a life-changing event.

When my wife received a temporary appointment at the University of Central Arkansas, we moved up from Louisiana to Conway, Arkansas, located in the middle of the state, a half-hour from Little Rock. This was in 1997. At first, I found the transition from freewheeling Catholic Louisiana to Baptist Arkansas very hard. In fact, it was a flat-out shock. But we've settled here. My wife's job went from temporary to permanent. I got hired on as an adjunct, then as a tenure-track professor. I published dozens of short stories, wrote one failed novel and then two others that weren't failures but still didn't find publishers. Our second son was born. I received tenure. You know the story. We settled here. I settled. Our kids grew up and entered college. We made new friends, found our bearings, and found a new church home. Finally, in 2014, a book I wrote was accepted by an independent publisher. That was *Island Fog*, my collection of Nantucket-themed short stories. I followed that book with *The Last Days of Oscar Wilde*, a historical novel (Burlesque Press, 2018), and now my novel *Nous Nous*. It's recently out from Braddock Avenue Books in Pittsburgh. It's a child abduction drama, and I'm told it's gripping! I certainly hope so. That was the point. 😊