

An Interview with Robert Greer,

Author of

SPOON

- 1. You've written a short story about Spoon, then a longer short story about him, and now a novel. What is it about this character that won't let you go?**

I first wrote about Arcus Witherspoon, aka Spoon, just over twenty years ago, the summer after I finished my masters degree in Creative Writing from Boston University. I was still in full-fledged literary mode at that time and had not started writing mysteries or medical thrillers. The story of the bi-racial cowboy searching the west for his roots was an idea that I'd had for a long time. I finally decided to put the idea to paper. When I finished the story I sent it to the professor who had headed my creative writing program, Leslie Epstein, and asked him what he thought of it. I'll always remember his comments because they were telling and I kept them: "Your story's quite good, but you need to develop the characters more. It should be a novel." That comment stuck with me for years as I expanded the story in my head each time I rewrote it. I can't say specifically what it is about the character Spoon that won't let me go. Perhaps more than anything it is Spoon's tenacity and wisdom that keep me tethered to him. In some ways he is a lot like my father, a captain in an all black unit in World War II, breaking down racial barriers and charging through brick walls. The other thing about Spoon that's so important is that he is a man

of the west, an archetypical hero, who can do just about anything that he puts his mind to. For me he's thus been a man who's hard to forget.

2. In telling Spoon's story, why did you pursue writing a literary novel versus a genre novel?

I wanted to pursue a literary piece because as I mentioned, the idea had been with me for more than a decade and I think in the back of my mind I wanted to satisfy myself and the two people who'd said for years that I should write the book, Leslie Epstein, who I mentioned before, my creative writing mentor, and my late wife, Phyllis, who asked me for several years, "When are you going to write that novel SPOON?"

3. Your novel has a great deal of suspense. What do you think makes a literary novel distinct from mysteries and thrillers? Do you consider this novel a "Western" at all? Do book categories really matter to you?

I set SPOON in motion to indeed have a degree of suspense, perhaps because I suspect that my skills as a writer hover around that sensibility. In a sense I hoped to combine the two things I've been trying to master for years, a novel of suspense and a literary novel into one form. I believed that for SPOON to come off well, it had to have a great deal of both elements. However, I don't necessarily make the distinction between genre fiction and literary fiction, since I believe that writing is simply writing. I'm not sure I know what makes a literary novel distinct from a mystery or thriller, although some people have argued that literary novels tend to be more character driven. That may have been true in the past,

but I don't think it's true anymore, especially with the great mystery writers who are out there today. I don't consider SPOON to be a western in the genre sense of the word, but it certainly is a novel of the west and as such I've tried to make the book take in the broad western panorama that I suspect many people see in their minds when they think of the west. In the end, categories don't really matter. What matters most always is the writing.

4. Do you still write short stories?

Yes, I still write short stories and the short story form will always be my favorite literary vehicle. I much prefer writing short stories to novels and I've often said that if I could make a living writing short stories, that's what I'd do. Unfortunately, there's not enough of a market for short stories to make that dream come true.

5. Your next book will be a mystery. Can you share a little bit about what its subject is? Is it harder or easier to write about the same characters repeatedly in your mystery series? Was it a welcome change to envision new characters in SPOON?

Yes, my next book will be a mystery entitled FIRST OF STATE. I will bring back my central recurring bail bondsman character, CJ Floyd, and involve him in a story that centers on one of his passions, collecting western memorabilia. CJ's ultimate passion, of course, is collecting license plates and in FIRST OF STATE he is charged with investigating the murder of an old World War II veteran, whom he has befriended. Ames, it turns out, is a collector just like CJ, with a passion for antique

license plates as well. The title FIRST OF STATE touches on the fact that every state at one time issued a first motor vehicle license plate. Those license plates are exceedingly rare and valuable. The novel has a bit of international flare so it'll be slightly different from the CJ Floyd mysteries I've written in the past.

Yes, I do find it difficult to write repeatedly about the same characters in my mystery novels. That's why over time I have built an ensemble of characters, any one of whom can "take the lead" in the so-called morality play. At this point, after eleven novels, CJ takes a lesser or greater role in each tale. It certainly was a welcome change to write about new characters in SPOON. Since SPOON is more character driven than my typical mystery or thriller, I had a chance to really hone in on each character.

6. You have a knack for portraying spirited, bright, resilient women. Are your female characters based on women you have known?

I certainly have enjoyed portraying female characters, and I've always taken it as a challenge to, as they say, write outside of one's own skin, especially when it comes to ethnicity and gender. If the women I write about are grand, bright and resilient, they are certainly a reflection of women I've known. Marva Darley, for instance, the principle female character in SPOON, is in many ways a compilation of the three strongest women I've ever known, my late wife, Phyllis, my mother-in-law, and my own mother. There is perhaps a bit more of my mother-in-law, who was

feisty, no-nonsense, and could be as common or sophisticated as she desired, in Marva. Marva Darley's graciousness, beauty and loyalty come straight from my late wife.

7. Ranching is a huge part of your life. How long have you been ranching and what about it appeals to you?

Ranching is indeed a huge part of my life and I hope that the vision of a ranching life comes through in SPOON. I've been a cattle rancher for just over twenty-two years and my family on mother's side were farmers back in Ohio. My agricultural roots thus took hold as a young boy. The thing that appeals to me most about ranching is the sense of independence that ranching life gives you. It's a job that requires skill, fortitude, and the heart of a gambler. It puts you in touch with animals, nature, and in my book you can't beat that.

8. Much of SPOON deals with the changing landscape of ranching in the modern West. Does the plot reflect fact?

SPOON's plot does reflect a certain degree of fact. Ranching is changing tremendously and in my more than two decades at it, the changes have been exponential. It's becoming more and more difficult to find people who know how to run a modern cattle ranch. Fortunately the foreman I have has been with me the entire time that I've been ranching and now his son, who is in his late twenties helps out as well. Real cowboys are a rare and dying breed, so I suspect that sooner or later there will be no one left to do the work. Two things have always been king in the west—water and

minerals—and in SPOON both of those are shown for what they are—the basic equivalent of gold. In SPOON, we see a coal company trying to encroach on the Darley's land. There's a huge element of real life truth in that encroachment. I used coal to trigger the suspense in the novel and could have just as easily used water or natural gas or some other rare and precious mineral to trigger the suspense. Bottom line—America's old family ranches are becoming rarer and rarer. My hope is that they don't one day disappear.

9. History plays a role in many of your books. Are you a history buff? Why is history important to your stories and characters?

I certainly am a history buff. I enjoy looking at the road map that tells us where humanity has been and just as importantly where we are apt to go. Although history most often tells a story that should keep us from making mistakes over and over again, we don't seem too often to take history's lessons to heart. History is important to my stories and to the characters I develop because I think it gives each story some sense of truth. I hope that there is enough history in any of my books to make the reader wonder how much of the writing is cold hard fact and how much is pure unadulterated fiction.

10. Spoon is searching for his roots/identity, as have characters in others of your books (Carmen Ngyuen, most notably). What is it about one's personal history or searches for identity that are compelling to you? Do you see these searches as tied at all to landscape and place? Is the West a perfect setting for your novels because this is a place where historically people have come to reinvent themselves?

I have written novels that have to do with people searching for their roots. In *RESURRECTLING LANGSTON BLUE*, Carmen Nguyen is searching for her father, a long missing Vietnam veteran, so that she can tie down her past. The west does turn out to be a great setting for people to discover themselves or lose or reinvent themselves. The landscape is so vast and varied, and it has always been a place where the content of your character trumps your bloodline. Indeed the west is a place where you can be as gregarious or as isolated as you prefer.

11. Is *SPOON* a non-traditional love story—a story about love of the land and love of a way of life?

SPOON is a story about the love of the land and love of a way of life, but it is also a story about family love and commitment and in the end a story about caring deeply about someone who is not necessarily blood kin.

12. Will we hear from/about *Spoon* again?

That's a tough question. I think I've put *Spoon* to bed for awhile, but as they always say, never say never. So there is always a chance that we will see *Spoon* again.

13. The subjects your novels cover are incredibly diverse: ranching, book collecting, science, Vietnam, even the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Where do you get your ideas?

In all honesty, I don't know where the ideas come from. They just seem to arise somewhere from deep within the recesses of my mind and the next thing I know I have an idea for a novel. The fully formed idea does not seem to come to me quickly. With THE MONGOOSE DECEPTION, which deals with the assassination of John F. Kennedy and also with SPOON, the ideas germinated for a long, long time. I suspect that somewhere entangled among the neurons in my head, there are a network of ideas that I somehow pluck from and turn into a story.

14. What books have meant the most to you as a reader?

My favorite book always has been HUCKLEBERRY FINN. I consider it to be the great American novel, much in the way that scholars would classify the ILLIAD or THE ODDESSY. In HUCK FINN, Twain uses the Mississippi as a metaphor for life so masterfully that I don't think we'll see the likes of anything like it in American literature again.

I have always been fascinated by the American western so SHANE, by Jack Schaefer, which the Western Writers of America recently called the best western of all time, is my favorite western. SPOON, in fact, has some of the sensibility of SHANE. BLUE HIGHWAYS by William Least Heat Moon is also a favorite, using as it does the US highway system of secondary roads to transport the reader through life.

Those are some of the books that have meant the most to me as a reader but just as many short stories have had a powerful effect on me. Jack London's

TO BUILD A FIRE is one of my favorites. Eudora Welty's story, WHY I LIVE AT THE PO, is another and a number of Hemingway stories are favorites including THE GAMBLER, THE NUN, and THE RADIO, which Hemingway wrote when he was in the hospital out west, HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS and the SNOWS OF KILAMAJARO. I have been influenced as much by short story fiction as by novels, and indeed, I prefer reading short stories to novels just as I prefer writing them to novels.