

Olympians, mascots, books, the Digital Age, and sequels



Q&A

with

D.L. Shiloh

Q&A:

What was the original impulse behind writing POOKOO?

D.L.:

It's about Katlin Hillmacher, a human black hole. He was a huge success and as he nears 30 years old, his world has crumbled. I wanted to write a story about what ever happened to Mr. Everything. I'd been thinking about it for a while.

When Katlin was young, he was humble and grounded and had amazing talent. His parents were his anchors, but during his senior year of high school, his parents died in a car accident and he survived it.

Katlin won the national college javelin championship and married his sweetheart, a rich man's daughter. Favored to win at the Olympics, he only got second place. "Only" is key because it was a psychological wound and makes him suicidal. He doesn't know how to cope with failure.

Originally he was going to be utterly forgotten, but while out jogging he saves a woman from a house fire and he gets second fame. It changed the whole dynamics [of the book] and amped up the rest of the book and enabled it to be a satire on Celebrity

Worship. It led to the invention of Lenny the Lobster.

Q&A:

Lenny the Lobster?

D.L.

Lenny the Lobster is a mascot for a famous Chicago eatery and the narrator secretly becomes the mascot. On the surface it's a ridiculous concept, a mascot in any novel about suicide, but it's a real symbol. When I tell people about a 6-foot lobster they can't take me seriously. When I lived in Chicago I remember seeing a job ad for that and I stored it away. I wrote about 90% of Lenny's scenes and then became a mascot for the Old Country Buffet for a year. Writing has the same effect, allowing you to step into another's shoes incognito.

Q&A:

Why a lobster, though?

D.L.

A lobster's *not* cute and cuddly – there's nothing in the story cute and cuddly. It scares people. And in the end, his purpose is to be eaten. A fitting end to the pathos, I guess. Katlin's celebrity has that...in the end, the public consumes a celebrity.

Everyone in the book used to be something more. The good times are gone. Pete's laid off from a good publishing job as a proofreader. He says "I used to..." a lot. Julie, Katlin's girlfriend, wants a one true love.

It really could've been a marble-esque story, about a Midwest son's fall. But the Lenny thing allowed for more drama and humor and a wailing for better things, as satire does. There was plenty of humor going but Lenny just opened the story up and I had to build it and build it. I had this end to peak to, so it was good. It just had to keep building. Being Lenny liberated Pete – but of course, he needs alcohol for courage, and foolhardiness and courage aren't the same. It was good to have a break from the darkness Katlin has.

Q&A:

For the record, what does "Pookoo" mean?

D.L.:

So many things, but literally, it's what Katlin would say as a child instead of peek-a-boo. But he says it now to point out the Afterlife Camera. One woman in the book says she thinks it means 'piece of ass.'

Q&A:

The Afterlife Camera?

D.L.:

He's had near-death experiences and his life has flashed before his eyes and he believes there's a camera recording our very lives, and he taps into that with a series of suicide attempts.

Q&A:

Is there a supernatural element to the book?

D.L.:

I would put it as real life. I cover NDEs and OBEs, sure. When I had meningitis, I had an incident of being in an abyss which could be called an NDE. Katlin had many strong concussions and could be diagnosed with a variety of issues, but he never goes diagnosed. It's 1991, remember, and things were so different than in the culture. He's just seen as charismatic. He's an Olympian, he's been on TV, you know. That thing. Celebrity. On the other hand, his actions could also be a ruse to get his estranged wife back.

Q&A:

It took a while to finish the book.

D.L.:

It's embarrassing. On and off, for 17 years. It's older than my son. But I hope the time invested is worth it to the reader. I finished it September 2nd, 2007, after a 23-hour stint over the Labor Day Weekend. I took the time because I could, but I won't do that again. At least Proust wrote 2,000 pages. This is only 220.

Q&A:

Why that length?

D.L.:

We're a society with a short attention span. Everything has a screen nowadays. I wanted something a reader could blast through, or read at segments when they had the time. My thinking is that if i can't tell an engaging story in 200 pages, I'm not going to. I come from a poetry background where everything is summed up in 30 lines. It probably shows in Pete's [Pete Warner, the narrator] laconic delivery. And it fits great on a cell phone. [see www.booksinmyphone.com]

Q&A:

What was the hardest thing about writing the book?

D.L.:

Keeping the voice over that time span, keeping in character, like actors. I worked it in three major six-month segments, but always puttered with it in between living a family life. I also had a band, wrote several movie scripts, wrote a large poetry book [*The Eyewitness*]. I always re-read my work so I'd get the voice of it. Revising. The end was polished about 50 times, yet it was the first thing I ever wrote. Everyone wanted me to finish the damn thing, especially me, but I had to have the spirit in it otherwise the whole thing would be false. The emotion of the book was tied to an old life and visiting it every day in that work mode, that negativity, was hard to shake. I've learned more of what not to do when writing a novel. Number 2 [*The Pilgrim Commuter*] is being done differently.

Q&A:

You wrote the end first?

D.L.:

I was in the hospital for five days in August 1990, as Iraq invaded Kuwait, and I was at St. Joe's in Chicago with meningitis. After getting off the L-train I went into my home office, shut the door and banged out the last page on my 1942 Royal typewriter. In 2007, the 23 hours to finish it off is fitting because in the last chapter Pete describes writing as you put yourself in a room and fight for your life. That was the last thing I wrote in the book. I'd never put it in those terms, until that moment, but that's how it should be. It was making life matter. Pete has an epiphany only at the end of this diatribe of deadpan humor and despair.

Q&A:

How do you think readers will react to the darkness of the book?

D.L.:

There is a core to the book, all mascots aside, that deals with the pain of life. Nowadays people are dealing with a lot of pain, with money issues, war, kids, you name it.

I used to say that people in Europe will understand my work but with Colbert and Conan, there's plenty of people in America who get satire. I was 12 and watching the first episode of *Saturday Night Live*. But with all the quirky humor influences I've had, there's a balance with serious literature and it makes for a unique blend. Sounds like a coffee, doesn't it?

Q&A:

Maybe that'll be the next venture.

D.L.:

If nothing else, I just want a reader to say, yep, that's how it is. The comedy offsets the drama. It's much more true to life. One moment it's all good, then it's not. Just when it's darkest, you bust out laughing. We're not alone in having to go through this thing called life. My teachers reminded me that struggle is part of the story.

Q&A:

What drives you to write your fiction?

D.L.:

It's summed up in that first sentence: "No one takes a photograph to forget." When I went to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, I really got focused on wanting to step up my game. I'd been getting pretty good at first drafts, that *White Heat*. My record is 10,000 words in a day. But I never revised. Bread Loaf put me in the company of Newberry-Caldecott winners, National Book Award winners, Pulitzer Prize winners, even the future U.S. Poet Laureate. It was a call to take my work to the next level.

Q&A:

How about childhood and early years?

D.L.:

I got the gift of analyzing from my father, who was a manufacturing engineer, and communication from my mother who was a telephone operator. My sister introduced me to Shakespeare and light rock like the Carpenters, while my brother who was an athlete and listened to rock. I had a younger sister who died prematurely. One side of the grandparents was white collar and went to church, while the others were blue collar and drank and smoked and danced. No wonder I'm a Gemini.

My next novel will show more how as you get older, you realize things are in your hands and it's unjust to blame others for how it all turns out. Having a family of your own and trying to provide, in the shadow of world events, grounds you and you can lose that youthful selfishness. Hanging on to the pain of the early days, like how school went, is overrated.

Q&A:

What's in store for you?

D.L.:

I'm getting projects off the tarmac and into the air. I have a movie script about the band years that I'll work on in July and August. I thought about making it the third book but the script will have to say what the poetry book didn't. I have a start on the third novel, but right now after getting acclimated as a publisher and

promoter. I've been making notes for the *Pilgrim* book. If it took me a long time to get *Pookoo* set how I wanted it, I owe it to myself to set up *Pilgrim* the right way. I have no intention to take that long. Readers are going to want a steady flow of something. To be fair, they didn't know me all those years and so the wait was no wait. I can't imagine torturing fans without something new. I'm a huge Billy Joel fan and I wish he'd put out a new album of original rock.

Q&A:

What can you say, if anything, about the next novel?

D.L.:

Not too much. I need that time to figure it out and then time to make it mine. I know once *Pookoo* is out, a part of it isn't mine anymore.

Pilgrim is set in 2008, so I'm trying to keep pace with events and put them in somehow. That's what's exciting about print-on-demand publishing. If I had events happening now in a book, it would take New York two years to get it on the shelves to you. If Immediacy is the watchword of the Digital Age, Literature will survive for those who can take a snapshot of the day. It's more like poetry.

There's a lot of red tape and hurdles with old publishing and so many hands that need a slice of the pie. The costs for a new book for New York publishers are \$500,000 and so no wonder we get templates, instead of new ideas that invigorate society.

Q&A:

Where do you get your ideas for marketing?

D.L.:

The rock stars of the 1970's. Houdini. He was light years ahead of the pack. I find one idea paves the way for another.

Q&A:

I heard a rumor that Lenny the Lobster might be running for office. Is that even in the book?

D.L.:

No, that's an afterthought. Remember, the book has its deep moments so Lenny was a refuge. When I was a kid, every year I'd get the Guinness book and it's one of those sources to get facts. I liked learning about new things, different things, and that series fostered that instant history and love of history in me.

When I started thinking of what I'd do after the book was done, it

came that a world record of most mascots would make sense. Lenny the Lobster is the loneliest mascot in the world and so a public outpouring of support would ease his pain.

Q&A:

An outpouring?

D.L.:

If one mascot showed up, he wouldn't be alone! I wrote the scene where 25 mascots showed up at a vigil for Katlin and designed the idea for the record attempt. There's also humor in the whole thing and there's enough Vonnegut and Irving in me to see the irony and absurdity.

Q&A:

Who wore your literary heroes?

D.L.:

H.G. Wells, Hemingway, John Irving, Richard Brautigan, Dirk Wittenborn. I like individual short stories like Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Rock stars became the new poetry, although I liked Edward Arlington Robinson's work and Poe's verse.

Q&A:

Can you ever see yourself writing a sequel?

D.L.:

To what?

Q&A:

Pookoo.

D.L.:

Sequels need to be better than the originals, or like Hemingway said, better than or different than the thing before.

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