Debut Novel Explores Themes of Meaning, Masculinity and Memory

BY J'O KAULENCEK

When Stephen Raleigh Byler graduated from college in Virginia, he didn’t know he wanted to be a writer. But after his debut book, "Searching for Intruders: A Novel in Stories" is being reviewed by critics and the 31-year-old Columbia School of the Arts alumnus is about to embark on a 20-city book tour.

What happened in between is a story about how the characters in his unique novel, took him on a search for meaning that ultimately helped him define his life long goals.

Byler grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in an Amish and Mennonite family, and had always enjoyed writing poetry, stories and essays. Still, he didn’t think he had the courage to try it publicly. After his undergraduate degree in environmental studies, he entered what he calls a “meaning crisis” and decided to study philosophy at Princeton’s graduate school as part of the journey. It was an environment “where the question of meaning was central,” Byler recalls, and so he came to believe literature was one way to engage such questions. That was the “epiphany” he needed to know he would be a writer for the rest of his life.

“Most people who study philosophy are interested in getting at truth with a capital T. I got lucky,” Byler says. “Columbia’s professors were engaging with real life, and it was clear that my novel would have been written if not for their encouragement.”

His professors have been just as supportive. “I got lucky,” Byler says. “Columbia’s professors were trợfully engaged with the real world, and not sure my novel would have been written if not for their encouragement.”

Byler’s “creative awakening” happened during this time. “I wanted to keep studying literature and writing, and paid particular attention to the works of Ernest Hemingway, Anton Chekov and Raymond Carver. He transferred his credits to Yale where he studied with Harold Bloom, and later worked with Robert Stone and earned a master’s degree in religion and literature before coming to Columbia’s School of the Arts.

“I think stories should . . . tell real stories about real people that ask real questions.”

—Stephen Raleigh Byler

Through the discipline of the writing workshops he took here, Byler began to see his novels evolve into a series of stories and vignettes linked together by a thematic structure. A class with David Plante, professor of writing, helped solidify his philosophically informed narrative and aesthetic. Nicholas Christopher, associate professor of writing, forced him to think through a collection of short stories becomes a novel and when a novel collection is not complete. Byler wrote stories. “I tried to write the book so the stories worked as individual vignettes, so the vignettes worked as short stories, and yet have all of it contribute to a narrative that is complete. Perhaps Wilson does undergo a subtle change throughout the journey.”

After spending another year off as a fly fishing guide in the Bahamas, he returned to Columbia and to a workshop with Plante where he continued on the book. Shortly there after, he landed an agent and the book was sold immediately. Even before he graduated the young writer was awarded a six-week workshop in 2001 by William Morrow, an imprint of Harper-Collins Publishers. The offer derived from a pre-empted a budding in the publishing world.

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Byler also wanted to see a clear demonstration that the science within the novel was ‘on par’ with the science he used in his lab. That is why Byler made his writing an integral part of the research at the Biosphere 2 Laboratory, the world’s largest sealed and controlled facility for Earth system science.

“Biosphere 2 Laboratory, the world’s largest sealed and controlled facility for Earth system science is due out in early February. Columbia University and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are collaborating to establish a framework for evaluating the Laboratory as a potential multi-user facility for Earth system science, engineering and education in January 2001. The Biosphere 2 Laboratory is the world’s largest sealed and controlled facility for Earth system science and is a part of the New York City-based program that will affect Earth’s future. In addition to the Biosphere 2 Laboratory, the Center offers academic programs in Earth systems for high school, undergraduate and graduate students as well as educational programs for 180,000 annual visitors and local school children.

Since 1996, more than 1000 undergraduate students from some 12 partner institutions and elsewhere have graduated from the semester and summer programs. The program also has five science groups: the Earth and Environmental Science, Policy and Management Group, which meets in summer 2002. For more information, visit www.eart舷.columbiana.edu.

“Be Intelligent: Selected Essays” by Stephen Raleigh Byler will be published by Simon & Schuster in early February. For more information, visit www.earth.columbia.edu.

Stephen Raleigh Byler

Discover Great New Writers

Consider this book next week: ‘Stories of a Spanish-Colonial Birdman Who Killed for His Art’ by Virgil Renanni, associate vice president for public affairs (Xlibris, $20.95). A modern day perspective on the timeless Arthurian epic from the Puritans and Anglicans to the American Revolution, and how they shaped the country during this time.

“Caliburn: The Lost Sage of King Arthur,” by Virgil Renanni, associate vice president for public affairs (Xlibris, $20.95). A modern day perspective on the timeless Arthurian epic from the Puritans and Anglicans to the American Revolution, and how they shaped the country during this time.


BOOKSHELF

“Big As Life: Three Tales for Spring,” by Maureen Howard, described as a creative writing in the School of the Arts (Viking, $23.95). Three novel-length stories tell a love affair between a professor and an executive; an Irish bearman who killed for his art.

“Warfare and the Third World,” by Stephanos G. Neum, director of the Comparative Defense Studies program and professor at the School of International and Public Affairs, and Robert Hardin, professor of government at St. Martin’s Press, $24.95). An examination of the numerous wars that have occurred in the Third World, from intervention (the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) to the United States troops in Kosovo to all-out wars such as the Arab-Israeli and India Pakistan battles.

“A History of Britain, Volume II: The Wars of the British 1603-1776,” by Simon Schama, University Professor, professor of history and history and archeology at Columbia University, is due out in May. The work explores the history of life in the British Isles from 1603 to 1776. "A History of Britain, Volume II: The Wars of the British 1603-1776," by Simon Schama, University Professor, professor of history and archeology at Columbia University, is due out in May. The work explores the history of life in the British Isles from 1603 to 1776.