

BEHIND THE BOOK - THE RETURN

Of all the books on my backlist, *Revere Beach Boulevard* is by far the most consistently popular. Henry Holt published it in 1998 and it got nice reviews, sold well, and was a finalist for the L.L. Winship/PEN New England Prize.

A few years ago, I was able to get the rights back and PFP published fine paperback and eBook versions, complete with the beautiful original cover photo of Revere Beach (taken by my photographer-wife, Amanda).

Originally, I had wanted to make it the first of a series of three books with those characters, but John Sterling took over as Editor in Chief of Henry Holt and he wasn't interested in a sequel. (The previous editor in chief, Michael Naumann, a famous NYC editor who'd read the book on a Friday and made an offer on it the following Monday, had left just before *RBB* came out, to be the Minister of Culture of Germany.) So I went on to make *Revere Beach Elegy*, and *In Revere, In Those Days* into the *Revere Beach Trilogy*.

Probably that's a better trilogy, a fuller look at the ethnic, working-class culture that was Revere in those days, a certain slice of Old America. But I still wanted to say more about the characters in *Boulevard*, so a couple of years ago I took out the old draft and spent a lot of time on it, made some big changes, gave it to my friend, editor, and publisher, Peter Sarno, and PFP published it as *The Return*.

It's a rough book. There is bad language, bigotry and racism, evil in ten different shades. But that is balanced, I think, by the stubborn love and Old World decency of the main character, Vito Imbesalacqua (in my early days as a published author, I felt I had seen too many books with "American" names, so many Joneses, and Clarks, and Johnsons and Winstons and so on, that I wanted to find a complicated Italian name to somehow even the scales. *Revere Beach Boulevard* showed the very best and very worst of the Italian American world and, while that upset certain people, there is no way to write good fiction by making everyone sugary sweet and blameless.)

Vito has family troubles to a degree that would kill most of us, but he hangs in there, keeps trying to be kind and loving, even as he is mystified by the behavior of his children and saddened by - but not afraid of - the evil in the world.

Honestly, if you are a lover of the *Buddha* books, and don't want any kind of violence or bad language, *The Return* is not a good choice. But if you are fond of suspense, and like the nitty-gritty, the rough edges, the hard truths behind family life and city life, and especially if you enjoyed *Revere Beach Boulevard*, then I think this would make a good read. Some of it-- like *RBB*-- is a musing on addiction, and how it affects both the addict and his or her loved ones, but it's not an easy book to categorize and it follows a cast of characters that span the racial, ethnic, moral, and generational makeup of our society.

It's always possible I'll go on with those characters. I especially like Estelle, the Cambodian American girl who becomes important in *The Return*. For years there was a substantial

Cambodian population in Revere, and I used to think about what those people must have gone through before they arrived in my city. I've always been partial to people/characters who overcome some hurt, abuse or tragedy in life, and so it seemed like a good idea to blend the Cambodian holocaust into the pages here and there.

There's humor, too, but it's different from Otto's sardonic wit in the *Buddha* books. It's a kind of humor particular to that time and place, a bit softer around the edges, a bit less intellectual, often self-deprecatory, more the kind of thing you'd find in the poolroom than the boardroom, a way, another way, of getting people through the hard times.

The cover features another of Amanda's moody photographs (from one of the least moody people on the planet, thank God), another scene of Revere Beach, with sunlight and sand seagulls below, all of it beneath an ominous sky.

If you pick up a copy of *The Return*, I hope you enjoy it.