



A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



One gets the impression in reading your novels, especially those dealing with spiritual matters, that you are probably a deeply spiritual person yourself. Is that an accurate description, and if so, are these novels an expression of your beliefs and in some regard autobiographical?

I guess it's true that I'm a spiritual person, though the word *spiritual* always calls to mind somebody who is not part of the average, ordinary, everyday world, and that is not the case with me. From childhood I have been interested in what I think of as "the big questions": Why are we here? Why do we suffer and die? Why does suffering seem to be spread around unevenly? Why does evil exist? Why does beauty exist? Etc., etc. I was brought up in a very devout Catholic family, but I have traveled away from that—while still holding on to a lot of what I got from it. I practice meditation regularly, and have done so for thirty years. I do yoga, though not much better than Otto does. I have read widely across the religious spectrum, as you can see from the list of books in the back of *Breakfast with Buddha*. I have gone on retreats—Catholic, Christian, non-denominational, Zen, Tibetan Buddhist, Quaker/solitary—but

the ideas in the books I write aren't always my ideas or beliefs. Sometimes they are, but often they are just questions that I want to explore via the characters.

A lot of novels that are spiritual in tone and content tend to be either overtly religious or patently sentimental, but you clearly aim at avoiding either path. Why is that?

Well, it is very dangerous territory for a novelist. I mean, look at all the killing that has been done in the name of religion, all the family fights, divorces, arguments! I think the best way to approach it is with a sense of humor and without trying to convince anyone of anything. I don't want to be a preacher, and I don't want my books to seem preachy. I want to entertain, maybe to make people think about things, but I'm not in the enlightenment business. You can spoil a novel very quickly if the reader thinks you have a particular agenda and have built the story around it. I have my ideas and beliefs, but I try to be open to those of others. And I try to find common ground among all the belief systems.

In explaining your belief system, you once made the following statement: "In a mysterious fashion not completely understandable to us, everything moves the individual toward humility." Please elaborate.

If you are young, beautiful, strong, and talented and live long enough, all of that will be taken away from you. If you are tremendously rich, you can't carry your wealth across the threshold of death. Those are facts, not tenets of any religion. For all but the most conceited or desperately insecure, it seems that you get wiser as you age, and that wisdom and humility go hand in hand. I know it isn't that simple, and I know some older people are far from humble. But it seems to me that life

is a kind of boot camp, designed to break you down and build you up in a different way—if you let it. So you lose your ability to sprint a hundred yards, but maybe you gain something more important in the process.

Humor, or at least a humorous approach to life, plays a big part in your novels. Do you include humor in an effort to lighten the approach to serious subjects, or do you actually view the world with the same humor that infuses your work?

Both. Certainly, as I mentioned above, I put humor into these novels intentionally. In my earlier books, which were not so overtly spiritual, there wasn't nearly as much humor. I like humor in real life, too, though I can't honestly say I always see the funny side of world events. Some things are sad, or awful, or painful, but in most lives there are these windows of time in which you can laugh, and it seems like a good idea to take advantage of those opportunities when they come along.

It is apparent in this novel, as in your previous one, *Golfing with God*, and your newest, *American Savior*, that you feel that organized religion in America, if it has not become corrupt, has at least lost its way. Why do you feel this way?

I want to qualify that. For a lot of people, millions of people, organized religion is a wonderful thing and an important part of their lives. I understand that and respect it, in part because I grew up among people who felt that religion gave their life a good structure. But I also know a large number of people—good, caring, sensitive, compassionate people—for whom organized religion just does not work. The ideas are stale, the language is stale, the rituals do nothing for them and do not seem connected to their everyday lives. What really bothers

me, and what I went after in *American Savior*, is when religion, instead of being something that a person uses to become more loving and considerate, turns into something people use to justify their own hatred or close-mindedness. That tendency has been part of human psychology for thousands of years, but the form it takes here, now, is abhorrent to me.

In this novel, your main characters, Otto Ringling and Volya Rinpoche, both men with strong personalities and distinctly different temperaments, embark on a road trip to Middle America, each undertaking his own journey of discovery. Which did you come up with first, the idea of writing a novel about the clash of beliefs or of writing a story that played out over a road trip?

The road trip. I had always wanted to see North Dakota, always pictured it as this mostly empty, beautiful, stark, striking place that was in some odd way spiritual. I like the idea of adventures, or road trips, voyages, expeditions. I am not capable of climbing Everest, so this seemed like something I could enjoy doing, and that would be a nice canvas on which to paint a story with some ideas in it. I made the first half of the trip alone, then went home, waited for school to get out, and made the second leg—Chicago to North Dakota—with my wife and daughters. I think we were all surprised at how much we liked North Dakota.

One gets the impression at the end of the novel that Otto Ringling has been deeply affected by the things he has learned during his journey back home. Please project a year or so ahead in his life and tell us where he is and just how he has changed.

I might write that story in a sequel some day, who knows? I guess his life would still have its same exterior shape. He is a

family man, loves his wife and kids, and likes his job. He is not about to throw all that away and go live on the old farm. I picture him as having a meditation practice, as paying attention to things he used to ignore. I think he'd make two or three trips a year out to spend time with Rinpoche and get his spiritual counseling. He might eat just a bit less, or a bit more thoughtfully. He might be a notch less cynical. He'll be a good uncle to Cecelia and Rinpoche's child.

How do your characters make themselves known to you? Where do you find your inspiration?

I write by the seat of my pants, almost always without an outline. I just start, and that seems like opening the floodgates, or drilling a well. All kinds of stuff comes out, and usually very quickly. (I wrote most of *Breakfast with Buddha* while I was actually making the road trip.) After a few decades of doing this I have the confidence that I can sort out most of the bad stuff and refine most of the good, so I just let things flow at first and then rework it. I think I've written the last few books in a month or six weeks, then spent a year revising.

What's next for you?

In this vein, I honestly don't know. A spiritual memoir, maybe, if I can find a way to make that funny or somehow different. I have a book coming out on golfing and eating in Italy. That was fun to research. I have a thriller coming out at some point next year. Right now I am going to take a little break—it's been a pretty intense pace the past few years—play some golf, spend time with my daughters, maybe meditate a little more, maybe take the time to write a novel longhand, which is the preferred method for me. No retirement in sight, in other words, and I enjoy all of this.



QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION



1. How do the first scenes of Otto with his family set the stage for what happens in the rest of the novel?
2. In what ways does Otto change over the course of the story? What key moments during the trip play a part in his evolution?
3. How would you describe Cecelia? Is she, as Otto says, “as flaky as a good spanakopita crust”? Is there some substance to her?
4. Do you believe Cecelia changes over the course of the story, or do you think it’s only Otto’s opinion of her that changes? Share specific scenes that support your view.
5. Which events or remarks in the novel convince you that Rinpoche is a legitimate spiritual teacher? Were there situations where you doubted his authenticity?
6. Humor is often employed a way of making us relate to a particular situation. How does the author use humor in this way? Are there particular passages that were especially funny to you? If so, why?
7. The book is partly about “meaning of life” issues, but it also has a lot to say about contemporary American society. What

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does Otto see and hear that makes him encouraged or discouraged about the state of American life?

8. Discuss the role landscape plays in the story.

9. Jeannie, Anthony, and Natasha are minor characters in the novel, but how do they serve to round out Otto's character? How do they influence your feelings about Cecelia and Rinpoche?

10. Amish country, the Hershey's factory, a bowling alley, a baseball game, taking an architectural tour of Chicago, playing miniature golf, swimming in a Minnesota lake, why do you suppose the author chose these kinds of activities? Discuss the purpose each activity serves in the story. What would the book have been like had these activities not been included?

11. When Otto comes across the metaphor of the piano-playing boy in Rinpoche's book, he says, "If I had been editing the book, I would have written in the manuscript margins, 'Work this,' meaning that the author should take the general idea and sharpen it, make it clearer to the reader" (page 174). Yet Otto can't get the the plight of the piano-playing man out of his mind. Why do suppose that is? What aspect of the metaphor is unsettling to Otto? Do you find it unsettling? If so, why?

12. How would you characterize what Otto experiences after sitting with Rinpoche for two hours in silence (page 237)? Have you ever experienced the pleasure of a quiet mind? Was it similar or dissimilar to Otto's reaction?

13. Do you believe Rinpoche is changed by the end of the trip with Otto? If so, to what degree is Otto responsible for that change?

14. Do you believe the ending of the novel was the best ending for this story? If the story were to continue, where should it go from here?

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ROLAND MERULLO is the critically acclaimed author of eight books, including the Revere Beach Trilogy, three novels about growing up in a tight-knit community outside Boston, and *Golfing with God*, a novel about a man's unexpected spiritual journey. His new novel, *American Savior: A Novel of Divine Politics*, has just been published. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Massachusetts.