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Healing the world through words

Rachelle Linner | Feb. 20, 2010

John J. McLaughlin

It has taken years for award-winning author John J. McLaughlin, 37, to grow into being a storyteller, a calling he practices ?in the service of the poor.? Having the ?gift of languages,? McLaughlin said in a phone interview from his Seattle home, means being a ?cultural translator,? someone who is able to explain the depth and context of people?s lives.

In that sense, McLaughlin is a distinctly Catholic writer. His rich use of imaginative detail is incarnational, grounding his characters in specificity and reality. More broadly, he values the importance the Catholic tradition places ?on symbol, ritual, and story, to learn to see the world in terms of both metaphor and narrative.?

His first novel, *Run in the Fam?ly*, follows Jake Robertson, a young black man who lives an impoverished life in the Flatlands of Oakland, Calif. Jake struggles to provide for his girlfriend and their asthmatic infant son against a backdrop of racism and poverty, frustrated at every turn by failed social programs and manipulative inner-city businesses.

Jake?s life is shadowed by his relationship with his father, Curtis, a violent man who has returned to Oakland after seven years in Folsom Prison. Knowing that Jake is desperate for money, a third man, Laurence, a sometimes-recovering alcoholic, proposes that the three men rob the labor hall boss, who has moved into the middle class by exploiting them. Jake is tempted by the offer and wrestles with the decision, knowing it will bring him face-to-face with his family history and show the kind of man he will become for his own son.

Run in the Fam?ly was published by the University of Tennessee Press in 2007. It won the 2006 Peter Taylor Prize and two 2007 awards from the Texas Institute of Letters, the Jesse H. Jones Award for Best Book of Fiction and the Steven Turner Award for Best Work of First Fiction.

At first glance, McLaughlin -- a Catholic who was raised in an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C. -- seems an unlikely candidate to be the author of the gritty first-person story he tells in *Run in the Fam?ly*. He received a sound Jesuit formation at Gonzaga College High School in Washington and studied writing at the University of Virginia. After graduating from college in 1993, he joined the Vincentian Service Corps and spent a year at Chrysalis, a Los Angeles nonprofit agency that helps homeless people prepare for and gain work.

That experience helped lay the foundation for the young writer?s literary development. Chrysalis had a temporary agency for entry-level workers, and McLaughlin remembers lunches ?on the work site with the street-cleaning team, and on several occasions [I] worked with a crew of men, moving furniture with them. In those kinds of settings, where you have time to tell stories, eat together and just plain hang out, you can get to know someone as a human being much more easily than you can while sitting across a desk.?

McLaughlin knew then that he wanted to write about the systematic injustices he encountered in Los Angeles. After completing his term with the Vincentian Service Corps, McLaughlin attended the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop, where he studied with Frank Conroy, James Alan McPherson and Bharati Mukherjee. He took to heart Conroy?s admonition that a writer should write every day, ?working the writing muscles like a pianist practicing scales.? It was an apt analogy for McLaughlin, a talented amateur whose musical abilities were encouraged by his parents at an early age. He has played the piano, clarinet and saxophone, sang in a men?s Glee Club in college, and sings in his parish?s Gospel choir.

?I listen to music to get into writing,? he says, because ?the rhythm comes before the words.?

He received his master of fine arts in 1997 and was next hired by Paul Burson, director of the Vincentian program on the West Coast, to be the assistant director of Semestro Dominicano, a service learning program for Creighton University in Omaha, Neb. McLaughlin went to the Dominican Republic with the program and ended up staying in the country for an extra year when he started a language school. He returned to the United States in late 1999 and settled in Seattle. But during his two years abroad, he became particularly interested in the experiences of Haitian-Dominicans and Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic, whose struggles, he realized, were not that different from those of blacks in the United States -- an experience that was also brought to bear on *Run in the Fam?ly*.

McLaughlin worked on the novel for seven years. ?What brought me back, over and over again, was the sound -- or the feeling, really -- of Jake?s voice within me. ?My story needs to be told,? it seemed to be saying, and I felt compelled to work as hard as I could to tell it as well as I could.? He immersed himself in black music, especially jazz, and read widely in the canon of black literature, especially James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman and Rita Dove.

And then, he said, ?I put all that away and when I came to write, tried to sink to that mostly deeply human place we all share.?

In addition to writing, McLaughlin directs a Seattle nonprofit, Education Across Borders, a cross-cultural organization that brings North American high school and college students to the Dominican Republic for one- and two-week service-learning programs. These trips provide North American students with what can be life-changing experiences of poverty and, at the same time, give them the opportunity to provide for villagers? basic needs, by digging latrines or building homes, and long-term development, by raising scholarship money to provide professional training opportunities for Dominican youth.

Ultimately, both McLaughlin?s writing and his work are meditations on the diverse ways that love and violence, failure and fidelity, suffering and hope live in the mystery that is the body of Christ. And indeed, McLaughlin says that he experiences his religious identity most strongly when performing the corporal works of mercy. He participates in his parish?s winter shelter program offering hospitality to homeless men, has worked as a chaplain at the King County Jail, and been an advocate for migrant workers under the auspices of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. He balances these activities with a multicultural family life that in itself shows his commitment to the world: His wife, a speech therapist, is originally from Colombia. His 11-year-old stepdaughter is partly of Mexican descent, and his 1-year-old son is growing up bilingual. McLaughlin is also the godfather of three Dominican children.

McLaughlin?s current writing projects include a new work of fiction and a memoir about his experiences in the Dominican Republic. ?It?s a book, on some level, about vocation: how I came to understand, and live out, my vocation in a new way because of my friendships with some very unlikely Dominican mentors, and how together, we created a program that?s bringing hope to some previously very desperate places.?

Jonathan Coleman, McLaughlin?s writing professor at the University of Virginia and a good friend, said that he could see the beginnings of the storyteller and the activist who would emerge in his former student. ?It came out of his Jesuit upbringing and a desire to learn, to do good, a determination to somehow make a difference in the world,? Coleman said of McLaughlin?s eagerness to write.

McLaughlin says he sees his vocation as one of ?trying to heal some of the world?s wounds and maybe showing others like me a way to do it.? And he is prepared to continue working hard to achieve his goals. He draws a lesson from Thomas Merton?s *Seven Storey Mountain*, one of his favorite books, that ?vocation, to be worth anything, must cost you something.?

[Rachelle Linner, a freelance writer, lives in Boston.]

On the Web

Run in the Fam?ly is available in both cloth ($32.95) and paper ($19.95). A reader?s guide can be found at www.johnjmclaughlin.net.

Information about Education Across Borders can be found at www.educationacrossborders.org.

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