

INTERVIEW

Peter Rock

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Author Interview by James Warner
Posted: April 6, 2009

Peter Rock was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah. He is the author of the novels *My Abandonment*, *The Bewildered*, *The Ambidextrist*, *This Is the Place*, and *Carnival Wolves*, and a story collection, *The Unsettling*. Rock attended Deep Springs College, received a BA in English from Yale University, and held a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University. He has worked as a ranch hand, a temp, a security guard in an art museum, and has taught fiction at the University of Pennsylvania, Yale, Deep Springs College, and in the MFA program at San Francisco State University. The recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and other awards, he currently lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and daughter(s), where he is an Associate Professor in the English Department of Reed College.



In your last two novels, you adopt the viewpoint of characters in their early teens. What draws you to this particular stage of life?

Peter Rock: Because I haven't grown up and don't know what adult people think like? Maybe that's part of it. I'm stuck back there when a girl skateboarding is the most beautiful thing in the world and any blowing piece of magazine could be a 1976 *Playboy*... It's sentiment, and it's also coincidence, the fact that I've been dealing with these teen characters. That said, I do think that those years are so interesting--it's before any real responsibility, but right when you have free time, usually, when adults aren't feeling quite as responsible for you. You're figuring out what you're going to do with your life--more so, then, I think, than in college, where all of this "figuring out" becomes so explicit and labored. When you're thirteen or fifteen you're figuring out what you're going to do with your life in an unconscious and implicit way. Also, you're just getting smart and are rightly suspicious of adults, at this age. And probably your body is changing.

***My Abandonment* is inspired by the true story of a veteran and his daughter who lived undiscovered for four years in a tarp-covered, wood-framed structure in Portland's Forest Park. What drove you to write about this?**

Peter Rock: That, I think, is always the question. Does all this stuff come from? [*laughs deeply*] Anyway, as you say, it's based on a true story--about five years ago, I read a short mention of a thirteen-year-old girl and her father, discovered living in Forest Park, a rugged wilderness that borders downtown Portland. They had been living there for four years in a carefully camouflaged camp, ingeniously escaping detection, venturing into the city to collect his disability checks and to shop for the groceries they couldn't grow. He had been home-schooling the girl, who tested beyond her age group. A second newspaper article described how the two had been relocated to a horse farm; the father had been given a job, and the girl was to start middle school in the fall. I thought the situation was resolved, and filed it away; then, a third newspaper article described how the two had disappeared one night. I waited and waited, searched the Web, but months passed and there was no more information. The two had truly disappeared. Unable to find out more information about how they lived or what became of them, my mind began to spin out possibilities. I realized I had to tell the story myself, in order to satisfy my curiosity. And the fact that there was such limited information was a good thing, for me; had there been enough information available to write a non-fictional account I wouldn't have been interested in writing it. Perhaps some might hesitate at making fiction out of real peoples' lives, or see it as a real imposition; I am a little uneasy about it, myself, but hope that my effort is a testament to my enthusiasm and respect. And wonder.

Tell us more about Forest Park. Did you go there much while researching the book?

Peter Rock: It's gigantic and full of secrets, wild animals, homeless people, huge trees, bones, secret paths. It's right up against the city of Portland and there's Lycra-clad folks running the trails, but off the trails it gets steep and tangled pretty fast. I did spend a fair amount of time there; mostly just climbing trees, daydreaming around, imagining scenes from the book, trying to see it all through my narrator Caroline's eyes. I knew from the newspaper articles the basic coordinates of the camp--it had been dismantled, but I think I found it, and resurrected it in my mind. From that steep area you can see down to the Willamette River, some of the big bridges, and the railyards... When I was writing the book I used to ride my bike across town, over the bridges, then up into the park; I'd abandon the bike and hike around like that, taking notes as I went, allowing people I crossed to work their way into the book. This was all a couple years after the father and daughter had been caught and relocated; and then a couple years after I wrote the book, just last week, I returned to that area with a reporter and photographer from "The Oregonian." It was POURING down rain, mud everywhere. Excellent. I was saying, "This is so authentic! Imagine living here in this for four years..."

We all try and shelter our children from the evils of society--this guy may be overdid it a bit. How far would you go? This ties in with the issue of kids nowadays needing to spend more time in nature.

Peter Rock: When I wrote this novel, I was really racing the birth of my daughter, and just wrote the last words a week or so before she was born. And then I had this fear that I'd just written this whole father/daughter novel when I had no experience at all on that frontier. So I have been waiting to realize some big mistake I made. And I think actually this kind of correction will have to wait for my daughter Ida to grow up and read the book, since it's from the daughter's perspective. So I'm sure I'll be upbraided. Even more than when I don't properly identify a Daddy Goat as a Daddy Goat, these days. Since she's now almost two, I'm not sure if I have a good answer. She's never watched television, we try to keep her away from plastic, she goes to a daycare where they do things like tend worms...so her life is pretty contained and controlled and safe. Once she gets out there a little bit, though, and starts walking around the world on her own? I very well might have to take her out into the wilderness and keep her for myself. I remember a friend of mine with a young daughter talking about his mistrust of the dark feeling he had seeing teenage boys skateboarding with their torn-up jeans, and now I feel it, too.

Caroline's father often quotes Henry David Thoreau, and she seems to have largely adopted his world view. "People were never supposed to live in cities," Caroline says, and, "It is important to always remember that at any time you think of it, there are people being kept in buildings when they want to go outside." I love that line! Thoreau had no children though, and it's hard to imagine him as a parent.

Peter Rock: So true. I mean, all that Natural Wisdom is so hard to conjure when dealing with a two-year-old's goat obsession. Parenthood is antithetical to reflection, which has its up and down sides...

"Abandon" can also mean yielding to natural impulses, as in "wild abandon." "Unsettling" carries the suggestion of the end of cultivation, "bewilderment" of becoming wild--all your last three book titles suggest a preoccupation with the reversion from a tame state to a wild one. Am I reading too much into this?

Peter Rock: Titles are so weird. The bad ones are usually the ones that try too hard. Sometimes you're gifted with a title that works right away, and then of course titles are the first thing a publisher will try to change, as it seems so easy. So I try not to overthink it. With *The Unsettling*, which was the title of one of the stories (which I changed to "Signal Mirror"), which was about the descendant of Mormon handcart pioneers, but I also liked the verb, what it suggested; with *The Bewildered*, I just liked the word a lot, to be honest, and turning it into a proper noun was one way to both heighten what I liked about it and to begin to describe the transformation that the characters in that book are going through. Which is a long way around to begin to answer your question--I'm not a person who believes that writers have much insight into what their books mean or how they make meaning, but I would say that my sensibility has long been concerned with revealing what we take as familiar to be unfamiliar, to first make the reader comfortable before making him uncomfortable. So, yes, those two titles and those books pursue a kind of transition from a "tame" or domesticated or familiar state into one in which the wildness is more directly apprehended; but I don't know if I'd call it a "reversion"; I'm not sure I'd call it a progression, either. I think once things have become familiar or tamed it's not as if you can ever return to a primal state. And that's maybe some of what *My Abandonment* concerns itself with, or spins around. Again, I liked the word "abandonment." The way it's made personal, claimed, in the title, is important to me, because I think your question picked up on my hope, which is to trouble the idea of abandonment a little bit, to suggest that it could be a very positive thing, that often holding on so firmly to where or who we are is what is keeping us from living in wonder. This is a title I had in mind for a long time, even when the book was just a faint idea.

Related: I did a lot of reading to prepare to write from Caroline's perspective--encyclopedias, Golden Nature Guides of Nature, etc--and I also read a lot of Thoreau and Emerson and Rousseau (The "three-named men," as Caroline calls them) because that's what Father reads, and what guides much of his thinking. In the book, much of what he says is butchered quotation or paraphrase. And later on when she has possession of his journals she comes across these sentences (slightly modified in my book/his notebook) from the essay "Circles" by Emerson, which I read after I had the book's title but definitely speaks to the atmosphere I wanted to pursue: "The way of life is wonderful. It is by abandonment."

From your writing, you seem to me to share with the "three-named men" an essentially benign view of human nature?

Peter Rock: That's a hard question--as a species, of course, we're not at all benign. Even in small groups we're quite malignant! I guess it's true, though, that I do believe in essential goodwill (there are exceptional individuals, of course); we do hurt each other all the time, but this is mostly due to misapprehension and misunderstanding. I like to think that all the people in my books really mean well; of course, they are often wrong about what is the most productive way to proceed, and--as in life--their desires are often in conflict with others' desires. They are trying to be more positive than merely benign, perhaps?

The character of Susan--does she too mean well? Are you unhealthy obsessed with electrocution? And what's Bigfoot doing in the book?

Peter Rock: Another interesting question. I mean, she doesn't mean ill (and what happens between her and Father in this book is not known by Caroline and thus somewhat mysterious, but I think it's most likely accidental). I don't think it's necessary to have a sense of my earlier novel, *The Bewildered*, to understand *My Abandonment*, not at all, but they are connected in various ways, as are most of my books. This is not to demonstrate to readers how dexterous I am; it is just one way I work, beyond myself of the coherence of these worlds, the continuity of characters beyond the short time my book might illuminate them.

Anyway, for a person who recognizes Susan and Paul in this book as the characters Nathalie and Leon in *The Bewildered*, your question would have a different resonance. I mean, is Susan really a human being? Is she alive? And, to take this further, is anyone whose body is addicted to a foreign substance fully human? Goodwill is somewhat dependent on self-control, perhaps, and those folks who for whatever reason aren't entirely in control might not meet some of the qualifications for my earlier answer about whether human nature is benign.

Let me put it this way: I used to work on a cattle/sheep ranch and strung electrical wire against bears. And I am extremely interested in energy. It really is everything--momentum, moods, atmospheres.

Well, maybe that Bigfoot question was just an aside, but I could probably answer it at huge length that would wear out the most resolute Web procrastinators. In short: 1) From second grade on, I have been largely concerned with the holy trinity of Bigfoot, Loch Ness Monster and UFOs; they are never far from my mind. 2) I wanted to write a trilogy of short novels that take place in Portland in the same summer. First I wrote *The Bewildered*. Concurrently with *My Abandonment*, I wrote a longer novel called *Sister*, which is largely the story of the character "Nameless" in *My Abandonment*, a man who lives in Forest Park and is trying to return to nature, who is obsessed with Bigfoot and also with Ishi, the last wild American Indian. It's also about his sister, who lives in San Francisco in his old apartment and is trying to find him.

I stand corrected -- you have a perfectly healthy obsession with electrocution! By all means follow up on why you "left behind" this fascinating-sounding novel about Nameless. You told me once that you felt like your novels that didn't get published tended to be the most interesting ones. This observation disturbed me and still haunts me.

Peter Rock: Over the last fifteen years or so I've gradually come to recognize that what I think is interesting is not necessarily what everyone else believes is interesting. Of course, a writer's job is to translate one's own obsession/fascination to a reader; still, there are times, like with *The Bewildered*, where I went in, as usual, with no concern about what everyone would want to read about, just trying to locate and explore what was intriguing me, and at the end I was like "Whoa! I've done it at last! This is the holy trinity--electrocution addiction, girls who skateboard, and the Playmates of 1976--and completely irresistible (throw in some blind people and guide dogs, power outages, and then infrastructure under the streets) to any person who is breathing...and then it turned out that really not many people were interested in those things, especially in combination.

Anyway, same with *My Abandonment*--only here it seems like more people are interested in it, perhaps primarily due to the "in my a true story!" angle, which I don't really find that interesting and that "I'm a little tired of talking about (vs. my actual book), but you can still ask me about it, James, if it interests you.

Which is a roundabout way to say that I don't often have a handle on what books of mine will interest other people, and that's kind of unfortunate. Sometimes I think I've published a book that's done so poorly, sales-wise, and then I've tried to sell a book a year after that debacle and no one wants to take that risk. "It doesn't matter what book you write, right now," is what I've been told. So it's possible that some of the "lost books" (and I've probably written at least one between every book that's been published and the next one that's published) are not worse than the ones in stores. However, and this may be kind of sad to admit, I think the books that have sold and that have sometimes grabbed people are ones that were a little quicker to write, and shorter; sometimes the ones that were lost are much longer and in some ways more explicitly personal--places where I was writing closer to my own sensibility, or with a character closer to my age or gender, etc. (The shorter/published books are just as or more personal, I'd say, just more implicitly so.) And to be honest I think I don't write that way (close to the more explicit facts of my life) quite as well, with as much focus or energy, if I'm not convincing myself as I go. If that makes sense. So in some ways these lost books are necessary, they help me to write the other ones, but they turn out to be a little more like a kind of diary or something? That's not exactly true; I mean, they are novels...

The "third" book of the "Portland Trilogy" (with *The Bewildered* and *My Abandonment*, overlapping in various ways, all happening simultaneously, during the same summer) was called *Sister* and, as I said, it explored the disappearance of the character Nameless (in *My Abandonment*) from the civilized world as he tried to go native, following Ishi the last Yahi and Bigfoot as his ideals. It also dealt with the sister of Nameless, in San Francisco, and some twenty-something bike messengers and artists and lesbians in Portland, one of whom becomes interested in a lonesome man who collects "Lost" signs that families place around the shelters and soup kitchens of Portland's Chinatown; this man begins a kind of correspondence with the sister of Nameless (this sister had placed such a poster, and suspects the letters she receives are actually from her brother, and she's living in her brother's old apt. in San Francisco, where she's making a lot of discoveries about his secret life). It's the kind of a love story, too. It has three different points-of-view: the poster man, the girl who follows him, the sister. They all follow each other, in some way. Doesn't it sound fascinating?

Anyway, I wrote it at the same time as *My Abandonment*, and I think I sent them to my agent at the same time, thinking *Sister* was the book we should start with. But by the time he read them (and I recall that he liked them both, all right), I'd changed my mind and decided that this longer book just spent too much time reaching out and connecting the other two books in the "trilogy," that it just didn't have its own obsession or energy; it seemed to be just enabling various narratives and narrative games in my mind. I just lost my energy for it, is one way to say it. And there were other writing projects that I wanted to work on, more, newer things, than to go back and try to fix up that book when its DNA was already set and it just seemed to lean too hard on the others, couldn't stand. Pretty vague, I know, especially for an answer that's so long-winded.

I was thinking of asking you whether anyone in the business has ever suggested you write something for the Young Adult market. I was curious because I know of a bunch of cases where an author has a young narrator, and agents or publishers try to push them into that genre because it's "hot."

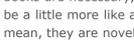
Peter Rock: No one's yet tried to push me into the genre, but the crossover potential of *My Abandonment* has been at times focused on and then not; it seemed like something they wanted to push, but then they changed the cover at the last minute because it was "too YA."

Devise a suitable final question for this interview, and then answer it.

Peter Rock: "For a person who sometimes claims he's merely a consciousness through which narratives and narrators pass, who says that being reminded of an author--when reading and especially when writing--is a mark of failure, who, furthermore, claims that he'd rather have his books published without his name or picture on them, you sure have a lot to say. Is there anything that you possibly left out?"

Good point. Well, I guess I'd like to stress that the thing about writing is a) I love to do it, and b) it's more mysterious to me now than when I started.

James Warner has placed stories in Ninth Letter, Agni Online, Night Train, and elsewhere. He blogs for Identity Theory at **Everything Unfinished**. His personal website is **JamesWarner.net**. Interviews on Identity Theory: **Joe Quirk, Tamim Ansary, Yiyun Li, Peter Rock, Jon Raymond**



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