

Dexter's latest semi-autobiographical

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Abstract: "Spooner," released on Sept. 24, is a family epic that follows Warren Spooner from his birth in Milledgeville, Ga., in 1956, to his work as a newspaper columnist in Philadelphia and a novelist in Puget Sound. Dexter currently is touring to promote "Spooner," and was scheduled two weeks ago to be at the South Dakota Festival of Books in Deadwood, but cancelled due to health reasons.

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Full text: In Pete Dexter's new novel, the main character, Spooner, at the age of 4, reaches out to grasp the hand of his soon-to-be stepfather, Calmer, while walking back to their car.

Calmer pries his fingers loose.

"He very nicely tells him, 'Men don't hold hands.' That's just pure South Dakota," Dexter says during a recent phone interview.

It's this stoicism that reveals Calmer's Midwestern roots, Dexter says. Calmer, born on a northeastern South Dakota farm, is based on Dexter's own stepfather, T.C. Tollefson, the first principal of Lincoln High School.

The National Book Award-winning author's seventh novel, "Spooner," released on Sept. 24, contains South Dakota connections, both in character background and setting.

Dexter knows the state firsthand - he was born in Michigan but grew up living in Sioux Falls and Vermillion, and he attended the University of South Dakota.

"Spooner," released on Sept. 24, is a family epic that follows Warren Spooner from his birth in Milledgeville, Ga., in 1956, to his work as a newspaper columnist in Philadelphia and a novelist in Puget Sound. Spooner's life events parallel some of Dexter's, including Dexter's work as a columnist, and some personal tragedies, including a brutal gang beating in a Philadelphia bar.

As in previous novels, like the award-winning "Paris Trout," Dexter doesn't shy away from complex topics, and it's difficult to forget the characters he creates, says Sherry DeBoer, executive director of the South Dakota Humanities Council.

"He is talking about things in American life. He is talking about racism, he is talking about social ills. He has this compassionate, witty way of using characters that just kind of get into your skin," say DeBoer, who says she is a longtime Dexter fan.

Many critics describe "Spooner" as a "memoirish" and "autobiographical" novel, but Dexter emphatically says it is not a memoir. He admits that events in the novel are based on personal experience, including the description of an operation where he did not receive anesthetic.

Dexter writes about a mix of real and fictionalized towns in "Spooner," including Falling Rapids, a South Dakota city that bears closeness to Sioux Falls.

"While Falling Rapids does have some some resemblances to Sioux Falls, without any doubt, it has some differences, too," Dexter says. "It's not like, if this were a memoir - I hate that word - it would have been called whatever city I intended it to be. There were reasons."

The near-500 page long novel took Dexter longer than usual to write. The book was three years late, he writes in a note to readers in the novel. But it wasn't writer's block for Dexter, whose normal writing routine runs from about 11:30 p.m. to 4 a.m. He spent some of extended deadline trimming 250 pages.

"There are many reasons it was three years late, probably the most conspicuous being that it was once 250 pages or so longer than the version you hold, and it takes maybe half a year to write an extra 250 pages, and at

least twice that to subtract them back out," he write in an early edition of the book.

Dexter currently is touring to promote "Spooner," and was scheduled two weeks ago to be at the South Dakota Festival of Books in Deadwood, but cancelled due to health reasons. DeBoer says Dexter, who first attended the festival in 2005, has been a popular festival speaker and that he genuinely cares about the festival.

"Even though he didn't spend an inordinate amount of time here, he has a real connection. He wants to really help our festival be successful. Even though he is really irreverent and dark and all of those things, he has a hugely compassionate side," she says.

Patrick Hicks, an author and creative writing professor at Augustana College, says Dexter has been engaging at his festival appearances. "It's really impressive how he can capture and mesmerize a room during his readings. It's a real pleasure to see him read his work," says Hicks, who spoke at last year's festival.

Among all of the nation's book festivals, the South Dakota Festival of Books is Dexter's favorite.

Unlike other more cut-throat book festivals, where authors are more out for dollars than invoking a literary muse, Dexter says authors at the South Dakota festival are genuine.

"It's friendlier, and nobody is there is to make a killing, nobody is there to get his name in the paper, at least I don't think so," Dexter says. "It's genuinely somebody trying to bring the idea of reading and books to a place that needs the idea."

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Dexter talks about writing "Spooner," his stepfather and other writers in a recent phone interview.

Question and Answer

Q: A lot has been written about how "Spooner" is a thinly veiled memoir for you. Was this more difficult to write because the book does touch on some realities?

A: No, it took a little longer than most of them, it is a little longer than most of 'em. It used to be a lot longer than them. I cut 250 pages out of that book. There were times it was more uncomfortable. Specifically, there are some things that happened in there, that are based on personal experience. Among them, first and foremost, being left conscious on an operating table, while they're drilling holes into you, and being paralyzed, not being given anything to put you to sleep, that, recalling that, ... I don't think they were more difficult to write they, just made me more uncomfortable writing them, that specific event is the only one that qualifies. That particular thing sticks with you longer than you think it would.

Q: "Spooner" shows the development of the friendship between Spooner and his stepfather, Calmer. How integral is this relationship to the book?

A: That's what the book is about. ... When I set out, it was the general idea. It wasn't the only thing that the book was about. Essentially, it was about my stepdad. Some things in there about him, just like some things about the title character, are invented and some things are taken about that particular character. ...

Q: Did your stepfather have a large influence on your life as well?

A: We're complete opposites. He was this reasonable, kind guy. I've always been the guy who throws the chairs through the window. It's been like that since I was 2 to 3 years old. While it was fine for me to have someone calm and dignified and strong there, I'm sure it was no picnic for him. Every time the phone rings, you worry about what he's done now. It wasn't just a childhood thing - I never turned into him. I came more and more to admire him. As much as I admire him, I can't become him. I guess I knew that.

Q: How does Calmer's South Dakota background influence his personality?

A: I think people who are from one place, you can recognize general things about them that come from growing up, in this particular instance, the northeast corner of the state. At that point, that's where he learned to be all the things he was - honest and thrifty. He worked every day of his life, harder than just about anyone I knew. He doesn't turn into that smart, without being that smart, and don't get that wise without having that natural wisdom. Those small kind of things - the way he reacted later in the book, when he got demoted, age of 55, his salary was cut in half. His first reaction was to get another job to make up for the difference in pay. That value being

somehow associated with the amount of money you make being associated with your value is something that was also imbedded into him. He realized that a teacher wasn't going to make as much as a banker. He also realized that a teacher was more valuable in ways that a bank never will be. That's what he chose to do the teaching.

He never had any money, so he had to be careful with it. That's something you learn on a 200-acre farm. Because of that, that was the reason that when he got hurt professionally, that he first reaction was to take the first job he found working construction in the middle of a South Dakota summer. That was his natural instinct. That comes from the farm. ... That singlemindedness, that willing to give up part of himself to get back what was taken away is fundamental to farming, I think. I have nothing but admiration for him.

Q: Between parts four and five, there is a jump of more than 10 years in Spooner's life. The reader leaves Spooner just graduating from high school, and then jumps to him as a 30 year old. Why did you decide to use this time frame?

A: It's just one of those things that, as you're writing, it's not a conscious decision. You just sort of think about pace and where the story wanted it to go. And it just seemed like time to get there. At that point, in things, when you pick him up, there's already been a bad marriage and failures and jobs and stuff. Essentially, it's almost starting over with a new character, but you realize pretty soon on, that this is the same guy you were looking at when he was 3 or 4 years old. We're just starting over. In fact, as we do it again when he's in his 40s. It's not quite that obvious later in the book, but time does jump like that. I had no intention of covering. It is a novel. It's not a biography. The thing that are essential to the relationship between Calmer and Spooner, you pick up with you pick up Spooner again.

Q: Who do you think are the most influential or authentic literary voices of South Dakota?

A: Fred Mansfred wrote a lot about that region, he's the guy that named it the Sioux Valley. I knew him and liked him very much. I think he's a very authentic voice. ... Dan O'Brien is a friend of mine, and I run into Linda (Hasselstrom) a few times. She's very pleasant.

Q: Are you planning on coming back to South Dakota anytime soon? I know you were originally scheduled for the Festival of Books, but that didn't work out.

A: I've got this little thing, I've got ... joints, I'm not sure whether it's loose, and that's not good because it's got to be put back in, it's one of those things, if you're careful of it for a month, it will get back. I'm limping around, that's the reason, I never miss that South Dakota festival.. That's the thing I look forward to all year. It's unlike any of the other book festivals.

Q: What do you say that?

A: Usually, you go to the other ones, there's that edge of competition, everybody kind of protecting their work somehow, that feeling that, it sort of that musical chairs feeling when everyone is worried that when the music stops they're going to lose their chair, and everybody concerned about who gets what stage time. Those things, they are awful for the most part. The truth is, I don't make a lot of friends anyway, because I've become kind of a hermit. There's not a lot of people who write for a living who I want to have much to do with. I've just been around too many of them. Writers aren't nicer than anyone else, I can tell you that for sure. You put two, three hundred of them together in the same city, doing the same kind of events, usually it's no good. It drives me nuts. The one in South Dakota avoids that - I don't know how.

Q: Are the people more genuine?

It's friendlier, and nobody is there is to make a killing. Nobody is there to get his name in the paper, at least I don't think so. It's genuinely somebody trying to bring the idea of reading and books to a place that needs the idea. Generally, the writers they bring in, it seems to me, are there for that reason. I can't remember them bringing anybody in that didn't. I can't remember them bringing in anyone that I didn't like. Even the people that can't write are generally polite and sweet and nice. It's just a much better one than the rest of them. I was really sorry to miss it this year.

Here's what people are saying about the novel:

"'Spoooner' is a family epic that digs out the emotions packed in memory's earliest bonds -- guilt, resentment, loyalty and love. ... It's a conversational novel, roving and inclusive, packed with Southern color and Northeastern grit, with rueful reflection and the contretemps of daily life that can't be avoided even on a remote island in the Puget Sound." Liesl Schillinger, *The New York Times*

"In 'Spoooner,' his autobiographical new novel, Dexter takes a look at himself, implicitly admitting that he's a little on the high-strung side, to put it mildly. He attempts -- if I read him correctly -- to answer the question: What makes a person turn out to be like Pete Dexter? It's a hard question for a person trained as a journalist who's used to looking outward, or for a man of action who prefers boxing to many other pastimes. How do you look inside and come up with an answer that makes sense?" Carolyn See; *Special to The Washington Post*

"'Spoooner' is a deceptively loose and blowsy novel that could jump the rails if not for Dexter's skill and ability to turn a phrase. This guy can write, and with droll humor, whether he's setting a scene ('Nothing grew along side of the road that did not have thorns or stickers') or sizing up a situation (he describes a Congressman as 'exactly as irreplaceable as the laces in your shoes.')" Ellen Emry Heltzel, *Special to The Seattle Times*

"Page after page, like a boxer pummeling an overmatched opponent, Dexter hammers out writing just this side of sanity, revealing the sort of thoughts and inner narrative and bizarre insights other authors might occasionally entertain but wouldn't dare commit to the printed page." Fred Grimm, *The Miami Herald*

"The novel reads like a tall tale. Dexter, who has a genius for names, often evokes Mark Twain in town and vernacular command and the humor is palpable. But it's his feel for family that makes this novel and his appreciation for orneriness keep the sentimentality at bay. Carlo Wolff, *Post-Gazette*

"Spoooner"

By Pete Dexter

Grand Central Publishing (\$26.99)

Other books by Pete Dexter

God's Pocket (1983)

Deadwood (1986)

Paris Trout (1988) (1988 National Book Award for Fiction)

Brotherly Love (1991)

The Paperboy (1995) (1996 Literary Award, PEN Center USA)

Train (2003)

Paper Trails (2007)

Book summaries

God's Pocket

Young Leon Hubbard was arrogant and near psychotic. So when he was killed on a South Philadelphia construction site, everyone who knew him wanted to bury the bad news with the body. All, that is, except two-- Leon's mother and the local columnist for the common man. Now back in print, "God's Pocket" is the powerful first novel from the National Book Award-winning author of Paris Trout. (from Amazon.com)

Deadwood

This novel captures with lean and rugged prose the spirit of the old West. Wild Bill Hickock is getting old, but can still shoot a shot glass off the head of a bulldog at thirty paces. He's come to the brawling boomtown of Deadwood to do some gambling. Dogging his footsteps are Calamity Jane, who is crazy in love with Bill, and the vicious Sheriff Boone May, who is looking to make a name for himself any way he can. And one day Bill is quietly playing cards, holding aces over eights, and Boone's weaselly little friend Jack McCall walks into the bar with a look in his eyes that says kill (from "Deadwood")

Paris Trout (1988 National Book Award for Fiction)

Winner of the National Book Award, "Paris Trout" is the mesmerizing story of a shocking crime that eats away at

the fabric of a small Southern town, exposing its hypocrisies and shattering the lives of its citizens.

The crime is the murder of a fourteen-year-old black girl, and the killer is Paris Trout, a respected white citizen of Cotton Point, Georgia -- a man without guilt. His crime haunts the men and women of the town. Harry Seagraves, Trout's attorney, has nightmares about it. Trout's wife, Hanna, bears his abusive paranoia, which grows as the town reacts to the crime and puts Trout on trial. As he becomes more obsessed with his cause and his vendettas against those who have betrayed him, Trout moves closer to madness, finally exploding with yet more violence and rage. (from "Paris Trout")

Brotherly Love

Philadelphia. Two cousins. One embraces the cruel violence of his mob family. The other, Peter Flood, tries to escape it. Both of them are caught in a vicious cycle of betrayal and retribution in Pete Dexter's most powerful and compelling novel. (from "Brotherly Love")

The Paperboy

The sun was rising over Moat County, Florida, when Sheriff Thurmond Call was found on the highway, gutted like an alligator. A local redneck was tried, sentenced, and set to fry.

Then Ward James, hotshot investigative reporter for the Miami Times, returns to his rural hometown with a death row femme fatale who promises him the story of the decade. She's armed with explosive evidence, aiming to free--and meet--her convicted "fiancee."

With Ward's disillusioned younger brother Jack as their driver, they barrel down Florida's back roads and seamy places in search of The Story, racing flat out into a shocking head-on collision between character and fate as truth takes a back seat to headline news....(from "Paper Boy")

Train

In the 1953 of Pete Dexter's Train, Miller Packard is a sergeant in the San Diego police department who has little time for hypocrisy or racism. He lives life as a dare, fearless and bemused, his wife observing that he "was drawn to movement and friction, to chance; he had to have something in play." He is also a golfer, though not a great one. Over a game with a fat cheater named Pinky, Packard's world collides with the troubled life of Lionel "Train" Walk, a young African-American caddy at Brookline Country Club. Train is a virtuoso golfer but is doomed to tote old men's clubs in a sport that can't find a place for a young black athlete. Train also holds a secret, a murder that has never been reported but haunts his every step. In the volatile world of 1950s racial politics, bonds of friendship that cross the color line are doomed, and Packard and Train cruise towards inevitable conflagration. (Amazon.com review)

Paper Trails: True stories of confusion, mindless violence and forbidden desires, a surprising number of which are not about marriage

In the 1970s and 1980s, before he earned national acclaim for his award-winning novels, Pete Dexter was a newspaper columnist. Every week, in a few hundred words, Dexter cut to the heart of the American character at a time of national turmoil and crucial change. ... Collected here for the first time are eighty-two of the best of those spellbinding, finely wrought pieces - with a new introduction by the author - assembled by Rob Fleder. (from "Paper Trails")

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