

Q & A with Tom Trondson, December 2020

Please speak to your background in tennis, and how that experience informed *Moving in Stereo* and its characters.

I was fortunate to work at the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy around the time Agassi, Courier and Monica Seles were making moves up the rankings. It was an unbelievable experience. There was so much excitement on the grounds. Nick had a profound influence on me. When you work for a tennis academy like the NBTA, it's not long before you're a jack-of-all-trades. I was foremost a tennis supervisor/instructor. But I was also a fitness trainer, sparring partner, traveling coach, interpreter, tournament director, cheerleader, scout, therapist, surrogate parent, bus driver and chauffeur. It's difficult to ascertain exactly how my experiences at the NBTA influenced my novel *Moving in Stereo*. But my sudden immersion in the pro circuit, and the book that followed can't be overstated.

Talk to the title of your novel, *Moving in Stereo*.

"Moving in Stereo" is a song off The Cars 1978 self-titled debut. In one way, the title speaks to the protagonist, Richard Blanco. So much of his world occurs between his ears so the idea of stereo sound and the voices competing in his head made sense. "Moving in Stereo" is also interesting, both musically and lyrically. The song has this surreal, otherworldly tone. The lyrics speak to a narrator going through a psychic nightmare of a sort. I thought both aspects spoke to the challenges my young protagonist faced. Lastly, the song plays a prominent role in an infamous scene in *Fast Times At Ridgemont High*, something that's discussed in the novel.

Does music play a role in your writing life? Did it influence this book?

Music has always been a huge part of my life. I'm the guy who plays background music when I cook, workout, socialize, and sometimes when I write. Often, music is useful when my writing feels stuck. Say there's a scene that's lacking an emotional punch or feels stiff. Sometimes I play a song over and over with the hopes the experience opens the scene up, both literally and emotionally. On a side note, I've written a syllabus for teaching a university level course about the relationship between music and writing.

Did you ever wish you were a pro tennis player?

A pivotal moment in my development as a tennis player was the 1980 Wimbledon final between John McEnroe and Bjorn Borg. I was fourteen at the time. Up until the finals that year, I'd been a Borg guy. But after experiencing the 4th set tiebreaker, my allegiance shifted. McEnroe's courage and genius won me over. That was the moment when I thought, *yeah, this is what I want to do with my life. Forget girls and socializing, even going on dates. It was tennis, tennis, tennis, all day and all night.*

What's it like to train world-class players?

They are sure of themselves on court in a way that's distinctive from most players. When they're receptive to learning new things (and most are), these athletes are very adept. Another key ingredient is focus. Once they step on court their concentration tightens like a screw. They also love the

fight—that need to battle to the end, no matter the conditions, how they’re playing, how they feel physically, what’s going on at home or in their social life.

At the same time, you recognize early on that you’re working with young people. World-ranked juniors have the same insecurities as kids their own age. As a coach you must strike a balance between demanding a high level of commitment and energy, while also remembering you’re working with goofy, giggling teenagers going through profound physical and emotional changes.

Why write about a man struggling with mental health issues? Do you have personal experiences you’re drawing from?

I’ve had my share of personal struggles. Also, like most of us, I’ve witnessed family members and friends struggle with mental illness. It may be our biggest challenge as a society. As an athlete I also understand how the competitive mind thinks. We’re trained to hide our weaknesses, anything that impedes success (like injury, illness and fears). I thought it was important that my protagonist not only struggle with mental health, but that his condition be public knowledge. I also felt it significant for Blanco to not be ashamed of his challenges.

I love that we’re seeing more professional athletes being forthright about their private struggles, be it depression, addiction problems, and gender/sexuality matters. Megan Rapinoe is a great example of an athlete who’s true to herself while participating in her sport at the highest of levels. We need more athletes like her around.

Why write a book about pro tennis?

I can’t speak for other writers, but for me at least, I feel character-driven novels about athletes are sorely underrepresented. On those same lines, I think there’s something to authors (or at least this one) writing books on topics they’d like to see in bookstores. I believe there’s an audience of sports-minded readers out there looking for a novel with insight into what it’s like being inside the head of a professional athlete. I chose tennis in particular because I know a fair amount about the game, thus felt confident setting the book’s world in those environs.

How did you come up with a character who heard voices?

The idea was first proposed by my writing coach. I’d created a character who couldn’t turn off the chatter in his head, be it during competition or in his personal life. Once I culled through his past (he was haunted by the death of the people closest to him), the voices and visions seemed like a natural progression. Shortly after that discovery, the Blanco persona fully emerged.

At the same time, I fought the idea. Let’s just say I was equally worried the result would read false. In the end I hope I found a balance between the reality and seriousness of mental illness and how it’s represented on the page.

Who or what are you inspired by?

Inspiration is a pretty broad topic...but here goes. Without going too much into it, I’m more existential than any other types of dogma (call me a pagan), so I’m inspired by nature and day-to-day existence, my kids, excellence in general, beauty, beautiful music, mountains, bodies of water and

trees. I'm inspired by athletes who persevere over incredible odds. Take Andre Agassi's run near the end of his career. For me, the magical part was his fearlessness, how Agassi shed all his demons. That pushed me to finish my novel. I'm inspired by focus and commitment, vision, people like the Irish writer Kevin Barry, Rachel Cusk, David Foster Wallace, Barack Obama, Rafa Nadal, Roger Federer; paintings/art by Turner, Basquiat and Cindy Sherman; filmmakers like Robert Altman, Paul Thomas Anderson and Wong Kar-wai; and musicians/bands such as Real Estate, Elliot Smith, Liz Phair, Tom Petty, Frank Ocean and Patti Smith... I could go on and on. Lastly, I'm inspired by human beings who try to make the world a better place.

What made you want to be a writer?

I first thought about writing as a profession in college. It was a turbulent time in my life. Tennis, always a place of refuge for me, was losing its hold. My family life was in a state of disrepair. Pain, anger, even disillusionment had swept through our household, something we were unwilling (or unable) to speak to. It was around this time I read *Less Than Zero*. The novel, about an alienated, drug-addled college student on Christmas Break in Los Angeles, hit home. Here was a young man with seemingly everything—money, looks, friends—who's so numb he can't act. *Bright Lights, Big City* was published soon after, another stylistic novel about America's struggling youth. These books moved me when little else did. I wondered if I might do the same thing—use language and emotion to create stories as these writers had.

Ten years lapsed. I met my future wife. We started a family. I was working in corporate America at the time, yet something felt missing. It wasn't that I hated my career path, just that when I examined my interior life it was filled with literature, film and music. In my head I was living the life of an artist, but elsewhere was this hole. My wife and I made a plan. She'd be the family bread winner and I'd stay at home with the kids while pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing. Those were good times. We moved around the country and met amazing people. I drove the kids to soccer practice, dance, sat in on piano lessons, and wrote early mornings or during naptime. Fifteen years later here I am with a published novel.

How does this novel, set in the 90s, speak to our culture today?

Hmm. Interesting question. I guess what I'll say is this: Like most of us, my protagonist, for all his celebrity and notoriety, is a flawed human being. He hurts and grieves. He makes lots of mistakes. But he's trying to be a better person. In that, the story could take place today or in 1996.

Do you still follow pro tennis? If so, who are you watching?

We seem to be at the crux of another seismic shift in pro tennis. Serena is closing in on forty, yet the record for most Grand Slam singles championships still eludes her. The Big Three (Federer, Nadal and Djokovic) aren't getting any younger. It's been exciting to see Medvedev and Thiem inch their way into the spotlight. I'm waiting for a dethronement. I'm just getting a little bored with how The Big Three monopolize the majors.

On the women's side, the United States has lots to be encouraged by. We've got Sloane Stephens, Madison Keys and Sofia Kenin. There's also the youngster, Coco Gauff. She might prove the best yet. And the men's side? It's not so promising. The truth is the United States has been on a

downward slide for a long time. To put this in perspective, the last American male to win a major was Andy Roddick, US Open, 2003.

From what I've read, the United States Tennis Association is pouring big bucks into junior development, only it's not paying dividends. I don't think we're recruiting the best athletes. That hunger champions instinctively own, isn't there. Which is bizarre. Tennis is in its heyday. The Big Three contend in most every major final. Serena Williams has proven she's not only the best women's player ever, she's a trailblazer and icon on race and woman's rights. As an American tennis fan, it hurts to see this void in the men's game. The United States has such a rich history in the sport. It wasn't that long ago that half the men ranked in the world's top fifty were American.

What are you writing now?

I'm working on another novel. It's set in the Midwest and California and takes place the summer before the 2016 presidential election. The story is essentially a triangle involving two middle-aged men from divergent backgrounds, and the woman who stands between them. The novel touches on Hollywood filmmaking, hockey, marriage, loss, and family.