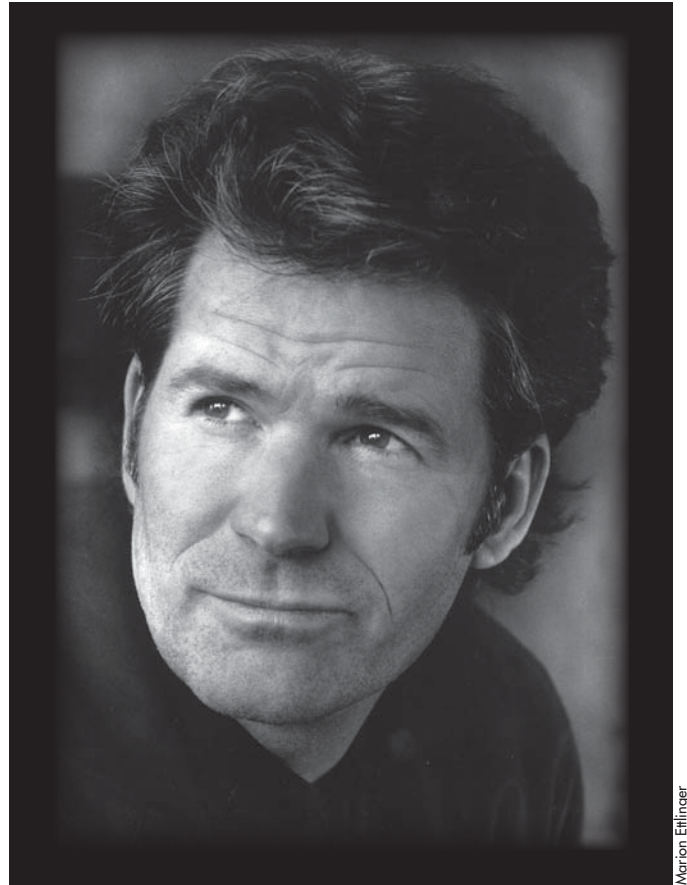


# In the footsteps of the 9/11 hijackers



Marion Eilingger

For Andre Dubus III, the storyteller's question is: What's it like?

For his latest novel, Andre Dubus III researched and imagined his way into the minds of terrorists—and an American stripper who danced for them

By Sarah Anne Johnson

**A**NDRE DUBUS III became a household name when Oprah selected *House of Sand and Fog* for her book club. (It was also a National Book Award finalist.) Since then, the best-selling novel has been made into a successful film, starring Ben Kingsley and Jennifer Connelly, and Dubus has released his next novel, *The Garden of Last Days*. The latter centers around a stripper, April, an unpredictable client, Bassam, and an angry hanger-on, AJ. From these volatile lives, Dubus weaves a narrative fraught with the dread of knowing the unavoidable ending: the terrorist attacks of 9/11. We know this going in.

What we don't know, and what Dubus handles so deftly, is how these characters who are longing for connection and love, while surrounded by violence, will make their way through the challenge of each day, never mind the events that will change the world on 9/11. The tension of these events on the horizon juxtaposed with the immediacy of the characters' troubled hearts creates a page-turner of a read.

Dubus' unerring realism and his ability to render strong emotion on the page pull the reader into a place as vulnerable as the characters, so that each turn the novel takes pulls us with it. In those respects, his novels resemble the compelling fiction of his late father, Andre Dubus, who at his death in 1999 was one of America's most respected short-story writers.

*The Writer* recently had the opportunity to speak with the son, who has carved out his own strong fictional path.

## You've acted in theater and some independent films. How have these experiences informed your writing?

As a writer who seeks to write character-driven stories, I see acting and writing as sister art forms; great acting is not pretending to have an emotion but actually having enough of it that the audience feels it, too. You can only do this by opening yourself up to that character, to put yourself into a state that receives him or her. (That does not necessarily mean that as the writer you're going to feel that emotion. Truman Capote said: "The writer must write as cool and detached as a surgeon.")

The poet William Stafford talks about putting yourself into a state of receptivity. As an actor or writer, if I think I've got a character all figured out, it diminishes the mysterious complexity of him or her. This whole process really seems to work better when it is fueled by a nonjudgmental and sincere *curiosity*.

### You've written a collection of stories and three novels. How does one book prepare you for the next? Does it ever get easier?

When I was younger and would hear established writers say writing gets harder as you go along and not easier, I didn't buy it. Throughout my 20s and 30s, I worked as a self-employed carpenter; with each project I completed, I gathered more experience and, in turn, became a better carpenter.

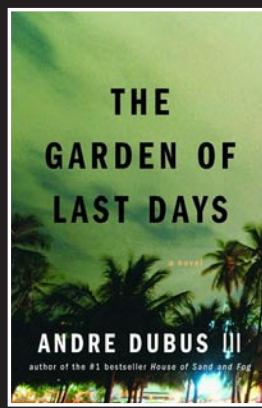
However, I've now come to agree with these writers in this respect: If you've been writing five to six days a week for years and years, you do develop a certain amount of nimbleness or fluidity with language. You're more adept at efficiently creating a dramatic scene and situation, *but* just because it came fairly easily out of you does not make it true. ... I believe there's a difference between making something up, which can be a contrivance, however well-written, and *imagining* it, which is when what comes out of the writer is, for some mysterious reason, more rooted in the imagination and *true*. (Whether or not it ever actually happened!)

### In your stories, employment not only reveals character but can shape who a person becomes. For example, the colonel in *House of Sand and Fog* works on a highway crew. How do you conceive of a character's work?

I once heard a writer say that the *last* thing he does in the creation of a novel is to give his characters jobs. How, I wondered, can he ever begin to know them in their downtime if he doesn't know what they do all day (or night) first? Because you're right; our jobs say an awful lot about us on so many levels. They also influence what kinds of lives we end up living, what kind of people we're around, how we feel and think about ourselves in the world, etc.

### *The Garden of Last Days* is a novel about the events of 9/11, but you don't write specifically about 9/11. You explore the lives of characters involved in the event and on the peripheries. How did this story first come to you?

It came to me as an image. After *House of Sand and Fog*, I spent three years working on a novel I've been trying to write off and on for 25 years. But once again, I failed it, which beginning writers should know is normal; much of what you pick up in a bookstore as actual bound books are the phoenixes that have risen from the ashes of what did



Dubus' award-winning work includes three novels and a story collection.

*not* work. (This is another reason why, by the way, I write five days a week and encourage my students to do the same; you actually end up keeping little of what you write. ...)

So I pushed that failed work aside, licked my psychic wounds for a day or two, then went back to my desk and stared awhile. There's a great line from one of Flannery O'Connor's essays: "There is a certain grain of stupidity the writer can hardly do without, and that is the quality of having to stare." She went on to say: "Writing is waiting." She did not mean waiting to be inspired. She meant waiting for the imagination to do its mystical work. Because one of the few things I know is this: Everybody gets an imagination, every single one of us, and inside it is always *something*. And sometimes you have to sit and wait and stare until something comes.

What kept coming for me, in the fall of 2002, was the image of a wad of cash on a bedroom bureau. I wrote myself into this image by describing it as truly as I could; soon it became clear that the money was tips. Then it became clear they were not the tips of a restaurant worker or bartender but of a stripper. Then I knew where this image probably came from; after that terrible day the September before, we read those strange stories of many of the

hijackers having been seen in strip clubs in Florida, Las Vegas and New Jersey.

How, I wondered, could these young men be so extremist in their interpretation of Islam that they did what they did but also went to strip clubs? But I was even more interested in this question: What's it like to be a woman who has danced for one of these men, and then, after the smoke has cleared from that morning of mass murder, to have his money in her possession? This question ultimately fueled the writing of the entire novel.

### How did you go about the research for this book, and how did it ultimately inform the writing?

I first had to learn something about strippers and the stripping business. Aside from having gone to one as part

## THE ANDRE DUBUS III FILE

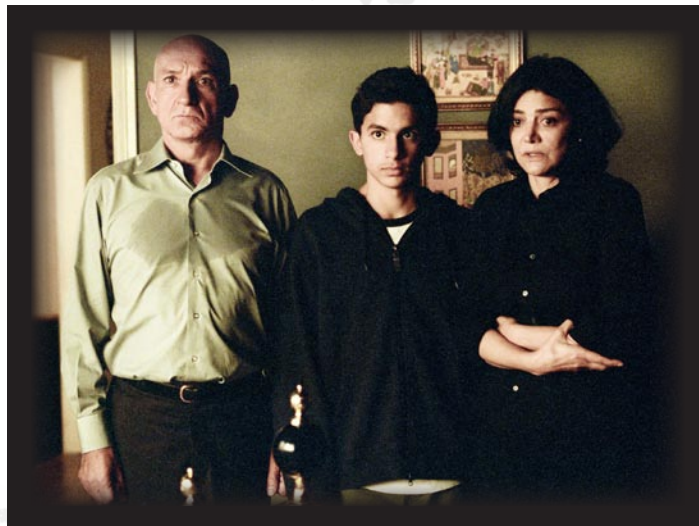
- Andre Dubus III is the son of the late celebrated short-story writer Andre Dubus (1936-1999).
- His work has won a Pushcart Prize and been in the Best American Short Story series.
- He teaches writing at the University of Massachusetts in Lowell.
- Among the ways he supported himself was working as a private investigator, corrections counselor and bounty hunter.

of a friend's bachelor party in my 20s, I'd had little contact with that world. A friend of mine knew an ex-stripper, and I called her and asked if she wouldn't mind being interviewed about the work. We met at a restaurant, and I bought her lunch and asked her questions whose answers led to more questions. I was careful, though, not to ask her any psychological questions. (Hemingway said once: "Not the whys but the whats.") So much of the joy of writing is the discovery of a character's inner life, what she thinks and feels about her situation, past or present. If the writer has concrete, specific and sensual details with which to work, he or she will more easily and directly find that inner life.

But after interviewing this woman, I felt like an archaeologist on the threshold of some subculture I now needed to see myself. (Something my wife teased me about quite a bit!) So I flew down to Florida and spent three nights going to some of the clubs where these hijackers had been seen. Ron Carlson has an elegant thing to say about details: "Details are for the writer only; they are the instruments by which we steer." So many beginning writers believe sensual detail in a scene is just garnish on the plate when it is, in fact, the meat and potatoes, the story itself. For example, one of the major plots of this novel would not have occurred had I not learned there was something called a "house mom," who sometimes will babysit a dancer's child.

Two years into the writing, it was clear it was going to be a multiple point-of-view narrative, and in the early drafts, I was comfortable roaming from one character to another, except one, the young Saudi Arabian man, Bassam al-Jizani. I could feel intuitively that he, too, wanted the microphone, but I was resisting letting him have it, mainly because I just did not want to write from the POV of one of these men; I did not want to go there emotionally, and I wasn't sure I could reserve my judgment of him enough that he would show up, not as I want him to look, but as he is. I know this kind of talk can sound awfully pretentious and godlike, but again, I've found time after time over the years that these characters will show up if you allow them to, if you let those details steer *you* as opposed to the other way around, if you write with an open mind and heart.

Well, how could I do that in this case? I was as outraged and dumbfounded and grief-stricken as anybody else. How could I let this guy in? So I didn't, for months. But then it became clear this resistance was actually hurting the novel and maybe even killing it. One morning, I surrendered to



A scene from the film version of *House of Sand and Fog*, starring Ben Kingsley (left), Jonathan Ahdout and Shohreh Aghdashloo.

this and decided to give the Saudi the mic, too. Except I knew nothing of these people. So, for the next four or five months, I stopped writing and read nearly 30 books. I began by reading an overview of Islam, then a translation of the Koran, then the history of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, on and on. I interviewed a Palestinian woman who'd lived in Saudi Arabia as a kid, and I conferred with an Arab scholar who directed me to more books, etc.

Eventually, I felt I now knew enough I could try and *be* one of these men.

And it was shocking to me just how ignorant I'd been. Some early scenes with the lead character, April, and Bassam in the Champagne Room had to be completely cut because he never would have said or done any of those things I had him saying and doing.

**You create a sympathetic character in Bassam, who goes on to participate in the events of 9/11. Were you at all conflicted in writing his character?**

I was very conflicted about writing from his point of view, as I discussed earlier. But Gustave Flaubert said once that the writer is the last to choose his subject; in fact, the subject chooses the writer. I've come to believe this, and have learned to follow where the imagination leads.

With Bassam, I was not trying to make him sympathetic at all, but empathetic. In other words, I was trying to capture what it may have been like to be one of these men in the last days of his life before committing mass murder and group suicide. My hope is the reader can have that experience without necessarily sympathizing with these people. (Personally, I do not sympathize with any of them for even a microsecond.) That said, I did come to see the 19 young men as brainwashed victims of a paranoid death cult, not Islam, but an extremist and too-literal interpretation of it.

**You've said that you didn't know how your previous novel, *House of Sand and Fog*, would end until you wrote through it. *The Garden of Last Days* takes readers into the life of a terrorist preparing for the 9/11 attacks. Did it change your process when you knew from the beginning where the story was going?**

With the seven other characters in *The Garden of Last Days*, I wrote with complete ignorance about where their narrative threads would wind up. But with Bassam al-Jizani, you're right, I was working with the historical record that told me just when and where and how he would go. However, what I did not know is what that experience was

Bruce Birmelin photo/DreamWorks/PhotoFest

like; I was given parameters to work within, but I was still attempting to write in that receptive, open state.

The film director Mike Nichols was once asked: “What’s the main question the storyteller asks herself before creating a story?” Nichols answered that it’s not the question the newspaper reporter asks. That question is: What happened? What the storyteller asks is this: “What’s it like? What’s it *really* like to be in this thing that’s happened?”

### Once you finish a manuscript, how does it evolve? How do your agent and editor contribute to the final version?

My agent and good friend, Philip Spitzer, tends to give his writers a light touch; he’ll give us his honest opinion of what he thinks is working or not working, but then he allows it to go to editors to hear what they have to say.

My editor at W.W. Norton is Alane Salierno Mason. I’ve had very good editors in the past, but I believe she’s the best I’ve ever worked with in that she seems to understand, even better than I do, what I’m trying to accomplish in my writing, and she works tirelessly to help it be as truly itself as possible. (She’s also a fine writer and has a wonderfully sensitive ear for anything that may ring falsely.) So, she’ll read the entire manuscript many times, making note after note, ranging from possible line edits to a larger macroscopic point about narrative arc, for example.

Then I’ll read all these and fight the writer’s natural urge to have hurt feelings, knowing she’s doing her best to help make this book better. Any suggestion for improvement I agree with, I’ll use to then go back to my desk for the revision. If I don’t agree with a certain point, I—like all writers—am free to overrule the recommended edit. But because Alane is so good at what she does, and again, seems to understand my work at a deep level, I don’t disagree with her very often. (The first draft of *The Garden of Last Days* was told from 14 points of view and was nearly 800 pages long. With Alane’s wise guidance, I shaved away six minor characters and an extraneous 240 pages. And that was after I had already been cutting and cutting!)

### What are some challenges you see new writers face?

I tend to think writers face the same general challenges every generation, but I do see some things in the classroom these days that might be new. There are four basic methods of directly presenting character to the writer and ultimately to the reader: 1) a character’s physical appearance 2) her speech 3) her actions, and 4) her thoughts and feelings. In the past 10 years or so, I’ve seen many younger writers neglect number 4, a character’s thoughts and feelings, his or her inner life. I have a theory as to why, too; this generation has grown up glued to so many screens: TV, film, the Internet, iPods, etc. Their experience of story is largely through a visually recorded medium, so as prose writers they tend to set up the camera and start filming, forgetting that the fiction writer can also go deeply inside the characters the way a filmmaker generally cannot.

I also see many young writers trying to make characters as attractive and likable as possible and then to put them in

scenes that are always entertaining. The result is fiction that reads like a situation comedy where the complexity of human beings and their experience has been cauterized and reduced. I’m constantly writing in the margins: “You don’t have to *entertain* the reader! Just write honestly, and you’ll go more deeply than mere entertainment.”

### What would you say to new writers working on their first stories or novels?

I would tell them to trust their imaginations. Do not outline your story or think about it or talk about it when you’re not working on it between writing sessions. And don’t show anybody any part of it ever. Instead, for those first drafts, do what Richard Bausch advises: “Do not think: *Dream*.” Then, weeks or months or years later, when you have a beginning, a middle and an end, let your story cool off a week or two, then go back to it and see it again, which is what the word *revise* means. Ask yourself what it is you’ve made here and try your hardest to make it more itself, which may not even be what you, its creator, want but what it needs in order to come to full fruition.

And I would tell new writers not to rely on writing daily to make them feel good about themselves. Because if you’re

**“So many beginning writers believe that sensual detail in a scene is just garnish on the plate when it is, in fact, the meat and potatoes, the story itself.”**

working at a consistently deep and honest level, you’re likely to feel a little vulnerable and inappropriate, vaguely immoral and stupid and wrong. These are all good signs; they mean you’re probably going somewhere substantial in your work. To feel good, though, go to the gym or cook an old man or woman a meal, or go for a walk, or build yourself a deck or tool shed, etc.

Lastly, I would tell new writers to forget about the world ever taking notice of this thing you do. Focus more on the work and less on the career. Make writing as much a part of your day as brushing your teeth, and one day, months or years into this, you’ll see a stack of pages on your desk that somebody may actually pay you for and make into a book people you’ll never meet will read. Tim O’Brien wrote that fiction writers tend to be the kind of people who want “to enter the mystery of things.” I believe readers are moved by this very same desire.

### Sarah Anne Johnson

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For more insights from Andre Dubus III, including comments on his creative process and his late father, click Online Extra.