

An Englishman in Portsmouth

Author Simon Van Booy reads at River Run



PORTSMOUTH, NH—Some in the audience leaned forward in their chairs as London-born author Simon Van Booy read from his recently released story collection, *Love Begins in Winter*, at RiverRun Books in Portsmouth this past Tuesday. Others leaned back and closed their eyes. Van Booy’s story, read with his melodic English accent, had everyone rapt.

Rather than stand, Van Booy sat casually before the audience with his legs crossed, bright purple argyle socks peeked out at his ankles. The crisp white French cuffs of his shirt protruded from beneath his black blazer as he held his book. Van Booy read slowly from the story, “The Coming and Going of Strangers.” He looked up occasionally and peered at the hushed crowd through tortoise-shell spectacles.

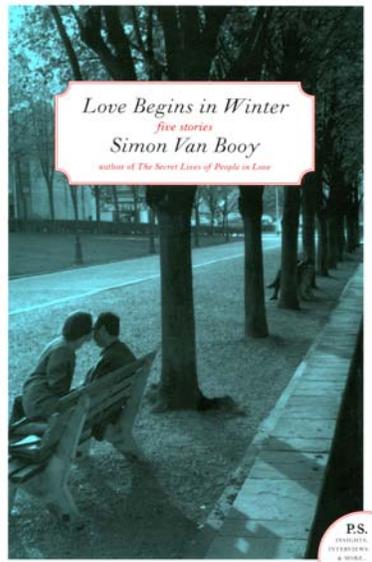
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The story follows the lives of an Irish gypsy family who have broken tradition and settled in one place. Van Booy’s voice occasionally fell into the gruff brogue of Walter, the young boy at the story’s center. “You can’t explain love,” Walter tells the sister of a girl he is hopelessly infatuated with. “That’s how it gets ruined.”

But explaining love—or at the very least explaining how people behave in the midst of love, while yearning for love, or grieving lost love—has become the fodder of Van Booy’s cannon of shimmering stories. Though the physical settings of his stories span the globe (Quebec, Ireland, Rome, Sweden), each piece is bound by its continued exploration into the geography of the heart. The same is true of the 18 very short stories in Van Booy’s 2007 collection, *The Secret Lives of People in Love*.

“Life after the ruin of love,” Van Booy told the bookstore audience, is a common theme in his work. *Booklist* has astutely noted that Van Booy’s work pays “beautiful homage to human connection.” Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Olen Butler has called his writing about complex longings, “pitch-perfect.”

“Are your stories based on your life?” asked an audience member. “Well, bits,” Van Booy replied after a pause. He subscribes to English philosopher Bertrand Russell’s idea of knowledge by acquaintance (gained by direct experience) and knowledge by description (gained indirectly). Van Booy said he both knits pieces of overheard stories (such as those from his Irish mother’s childhood), and stitches together bits of unforgettable moments from his own travels. He does not, however, want to appear as though he is callously mining the lives of others for his art. “I don’t *use* people for stories,” Van Booy has written, “I *use* stories to express my feelings for people.”



The young author’s own life has certainly been a quilt of experience to draw from. Raised in Oxford, England and in Wales, Van Booy moved stateside to play football at Campbellsville University in Kentucky. Soon after, he spent time living in Greece and Paris. Today he lives in Brooklyn with his four-year-old daughter. With an MFA from Southampton College, he teaches writing at the School of Visual Arts in New York and at Long Island University.

Asked if he would transition from short stories to a novel, Van Booy said he was finishing one now that will be released next year. “Novels are harder,” he confessed. “They plod. There’s so much filler.” He noted his admiration for the novels of Virginia Woolf and John Dos Passos. “I think the English language was given a sort of promotion when these people were writing,” he told the audience.

The unfinished novel is set in France, Sicily, and Greece, where Van Booy said he’d soon return for research. “I just need to sit in those Greek cafés and get all the details—like the

smells. Or something strange, like a Whitney Houston poster on the wall. You can't make those things up! But these are the sort of details that make [a story] real."

Future novel aside, Van Booy has thus far built a reputation for richly drawn and empathetic stories; *Booklist* has noted his "uncanny ability to create intense moods and emotions within the space of a few poetic paragraphs." His stories have just earned him a nomination for the prestigious 2009 Frank O'Connor Short Story Award. With a cash award of 35,000 Euro, it is the largest prize in the world for the short story form. Pulitzer Prize-winner Jhumpa Lahiri (author of *The Namesake* and *The Interpreter of Maladies*) was a recent winner. This year's winner will be announced in September.

"How do you start a story?" asked a young woman in the front row.

"Oh, that's the hardest," Van Booy groaned. Then he paused, and a smile spread across his face. "But also the easiest!" He used to fret over having enough subject matter. But his affinity for travel, late night walks, and a ceaseless curiosity about the lives of others, has left him brimming with stories.

"Look, you can't meet people by sitting and thinking about it," Van Booy tells the young woman. "You have to go out and walk around. Then something happens. Writing is the same way: you have to start."