

As part of Quincy's NEA Big Read, we were fortunate to be able to chat with the thoughtful and charming Ron Carlson, author of *Five Skies*, via Skype during a moderated interview. Attendees in Quincy submitted questions which were asked of him by Katie Kraushaar, our discussion moderator. Warning! Spoiler Alert!

Q: What does the title mean?

A: Titles are complicated. The title of *Five Skies* came from a phrase in the book spoken by Arthur Keys during a phone call with one of his Los Angeles workers, "There are five skies every day." I grew up in the mountains of Utah, and in the mountains you never get the day you start out with. [In the setting of *Five Skies*] you are aware of the age of the setting, the eons of time looking at the horizon of crenellated mountains. In the case of *Five Skies*, I was not trying to be symbolic or clever. Titles should be apt and fitting to the book.

Q: How did you become an expert on non-communicative men?

A: My parents had 10 siblings each, so finding time to talk to someone was a challenge. You had to do something, work on something, with a family member to get them to talk. Twenty minutes or so into a project, and the talking would start.... Men keep things inside [because] they are not confident of having the right language.

Q: Was it necessary for Ronnie to die? Was it necessary for Art to destroy the ramp?

A: I get letters each month with these questions. I do not outline stories or novels before beginning to write. I work as closely to real time as possible. I could see it (the accident) ahead, and it upset me so much [to know the direction the novel was taking] I had to stop writing for 10 days before finishing the scene. Ronnie is the first character I named after myself. Arthur was so careful building the ramp – step-by-step, methodical – he also had to be careful in its destruction. He may not have respected the project, but he had to be scrupulous about finishing (destroying) it.

Q: Why did Ronnie have to die? What would his life have been like if he had lived?

A: We want to be in charge, but nothing feels better than handing someone a tool and giving them opportunity....

Q: Was Art preventing one more death in the destruction of the ramp? Why?

A: Yes. Art is careful with his actions and anything that might come from them.

Q: Are we (readers) really supposed to believe in the circumstances that led Darwin to Art—a trained engineer?

A: This is a new question for me. It was to "Darwin's great, good luck" that he found Arthur for the project.

Q: Why aren't readers told from the beginning what the project is?

A: The full project is not revealed right away. The book peels back layers of revelation that it is a ramp. It comes out as they (Darwin, Arthur, & Ronnie) work. When the men are looking at the schematics the first day, the shape is there, and the idea of what it will be.

Q: What do you do when writing and it doesn't come naturally?

A: Writing is being in the dark; the hours spent there teach you what the story is. Stay in the room. Use what is happening to shape the process.

Q: What do you know about Diff that we don't know that causes others to dislike him or be wary of him?

A: I had so much fun creating Rio Difficulito and Diff! Diff is an amalgam of self-made, brilliant, dynamite, & vaguely arrogant men. He is dismissive of opinions of others. The drive into the canyon is an example of how the characters in the book threaten me with facts and draw readers into the story. (When several of the book club members mentioned having to take a break from reading the drive into the canyon, Ron said his "goal as a writer is to make the reader get out a sleeping bag or open a can of beans.")

Q: What authors do you read?

A: I reads all the time—galleys to review & students' writing. I read Robert Stone & Dennis Jordan; their books are darker than I write. Cormac McCarthy; my favorite is *Cities of the Plain*. His writing is tough and gives readers a physical evocation of space. Ann Beattie. After Alice Munroe received the Nobel Prize, I read her collected stories. William Trevor.

Q: You seem to enjoy talking to people who have read your works. Do you ever learn anything from readers about your writing that you did not expect to learn?

A: I don't think about readers while I'm writing, or I start to see my parents, my pastor, my children reading what I write. After something is published, I can decide who not to show it to. That is when writing connects to a real person.

Q: How did you find out *Five Skies* was selected for the NEA Big Read?

A: When one of my former students won the Pulitzer Prize, he explained that 'something happened to the book on its way to obscurity.' Amy Stolls from the NEA contacted me about *Five Skies* being included in the list of new books [for the Big Read].

Q: Does the spider you keep on a string next to your computer for your grandsons have a name?

A: I have others! There is a rhinoceros. And my grandsons have props now, too, including a snake!

Notes by Katie Kraushaar