

The Making of a Writer

Andre Dubus III talks about his rough upbringing in his new memoir *Townie*

By Clayton Moore

After dazzling critics and readers alike with the novels *The Garden of Last Days* (2008) and *House of Sand and Fog* (1999), the last thing readers might expect from Andre Dubus III is a memoir about his adolescence and rise to maturity in New England. In *Townie*, Dubus uses his talents to describe his initiation into the culture of violence in Massachusetts' mill towns and his complex, challenging relationship with his father, the famed short-story writer Andre Dubus. In a starred review, *Kirkus* called it "a striking, eloquent account of growing up poor and of the making of a writer."

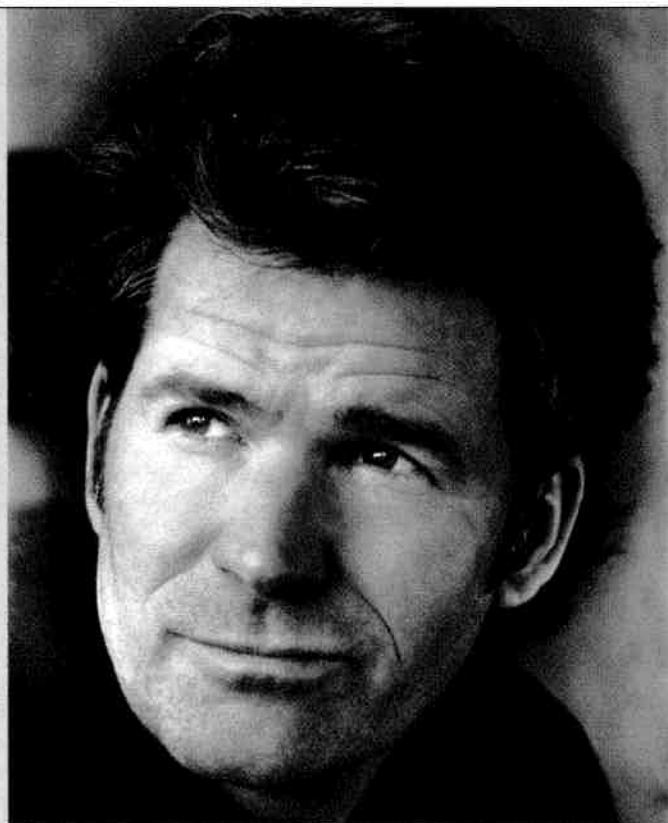


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What is *Townie* about, and what story does it tell?

I'd say this book is about a lot of things—what happens to families after a divorce, the deep challenges of trying to raise children in the midst of poverty, the father/son relationship and how divorced fathers get left out of their sons' growing masculine identities—but I think the heart of this book is an exploration of the roots of physical violence, the experience of it as both a victim and a perpetrator and how the human creative impulse, which seems to me inherently empathic, can lead to peace.

You're well known for your novels, but this is a very personal story. How did you come to write a memoir?

I came to write *Townie* almost by accident. I was working on an essay about baseball, but I knew very little about it and, in fact, had watched only two games by the age of 40. So the question became this: How did I miss baseball as a kid? What was I doing instead? Over 500 pages later, I could see clearly what I'd been doing—living in poverty with my three siblings and single mother in a string of rented houses in Massachusetts mill towns, getting bullied then learning how to fight till that's all I seemed to do anymore, then discovering creative writing which changed everything.

Writing memoir and writing fiction are often described as being different experiences. What was your experience in crafting memories into a narrative?

What surprised me most about writing memoir as opposed to fiction is that it feels very much like writing a novel, even though what you've written is rooted in your memory of actual events. For the

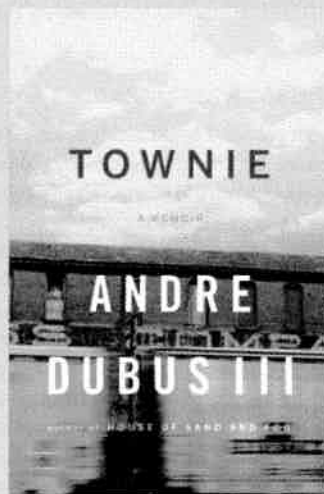
memoirist, the story is already there, so now he or she can simply work on capturing what it was like, what it was *really* like, which, of course, is entirely subjective and leads to all sorts of small and large decisions about what to leave in and what to leave out.

Much of the book is about your father's absence and his influence on your life. How important is that facet to *Townie*?

My father's absence from my life as a kid shows up as a central experience here, something that actually surprised me. One of the things I love about writing is what it can teach the writer. I had thought for years that my rage as a young fighter came from having been bullied, but that was only part of it. There was also the grief of the abandoned child. And there was the chaos that was our domestic life and more. Nothing is simple about people, it seems.

How much influence did your father have on your development as a writer?

We lived in small rented houses with thin walls, so every day when our father sat down to write, we four kids would have to go outside and play or be quiet. For years I thought that everyone's dad did that, closed themselves off in a room to write stories. Later, when I was in my 20s and finding myself on the artistic road, I realized that I viewed that road as just as legitimate a direction to take as law, medicine or anything else. It was that memory of my father going to that room daily that did this for me, and that's his essential influence.



Townie
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