



The Question

by Bruce Steinberg

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When the box arrived, I thought I had arrived. I tore off the packaging tape before the UPS truck left the driveway. The distinct smell of newly bound books, like packed library shelves, mixed with a hint of freshly applied glue. Not just any collection of books but a delivery of *my* book. A dozen author copies. My first published novel, with my name, my title, my cover design, my author bio, my photo—my arms smartly folded over my chest below a posed squinty-eyed look through glasses.

In the years since, after witnessing the lives of many novel writers, published, unpublished, and, most commonly, unfinished, I suspect my reaction was typical of many debut novelists: that the whole world would hot-flash over my book. More than read it, the population would feel compelled to peruse it, sigh its words aloud, hover over its themes, and encourage friends and family to do the same; a lineage of word-of-mouth that would inevitably find its way to Oprah. A movie based on my debut novel was a matter of when. Since the novel is set in the mid-1960s, I had the soundtrack planned out. The Stones, The Turtles, The Mamas and the Papas. The only questions I had at that time, during the first inhales of my novel's scent, were whether Paul McCartney would permit use of Beatle originals and whether the people running the Oscars would seat me on the main floor.

Inhales have to be exhaled.

No one has yet called about a movie deal.

It's not that the print novel didn't do okay and the e-book edition achieved okay success. Most debut novelists, though, we don't see "okay" through our rose-colored glasses. We see Caribbean real estate, and lots of it.

This particular debut novel was different from all others. That's what I had thought. Mine was based on my father's death when I was eight years old, a death I had witnessed. To this day, decades later, I can see myself at the foot of my parents' bed. My brother, then twelve, and sister, then nine, stood on opposite sides, and my mother hopped on the bed, screaming while my father angled over the mattress, bleeding out his mouth, nose, and ears from an aortic aneurysm. With all this based-on-fact emotion soaked into the pages, how could people keep from sweeping copies off bookstore shelves, cuddling them in their arms?

I spoke at an author presentation in which 250 people attended and sold out my stash of copies. Other presentations had over sixty book-buying attendees. These events occurred soon after the novel's release. A couple months later, most presentations had fewer than ten in attendance. One had three. At an independent bookstore in Chicago, the only people in attendance were bookstore employees who felt sorry for me, had to be there anyway, and blamed the snubbing on the half-inch of recent snowfall.

During this period of growing disinterest, I began to question the point of writing my debut novel. I never intended it for publication, my purpose an effort to better understand my brother and sister. For all our lives after our father's death, we never discussed it. When they read the manuscript, they independently called me to say, "How did you know?" How did I know their inner feelings: my sister's guilt over not telling Mom about Dad's chest-pain complaint the night before; my

brother's anger at his lost childhood, replaced by the burden of being what our mother called, "The new man of the house"? I phoned my mother when the novel won publication. It was an opportunity I grasped, to tell her she did a wonderful job raising us on her own. For the first time, my mother, brother, sister, and I talked about Dad's death in detail. This bonding should have happened decades before the novel's publication. Having it happen soon after the book's publication stood as the best reason to have written the novel. That is until I was asked a question during one of my author presentations.

It occurred at a Barnes & Noble. Sixteen people showed. I recall the number because I always counted. My wife's Uncle Ben was there, and he had brought his grandson. Like most authors, I asked people in attendance if they have any questions. Uncle Ben raised his hand, nodded toward his grandson, and asked, "He just lost his father to a heart attack. His dad was forty-two. He's twelve. What advice do you have for someone like him; like you?"

Until that moment, my presentation had gone smoothly. I had told anecdotes about the people from my boyhood neighborhood, made jokes about the publishing industry, and read a passage from the novel. People had laughed and nodded. No one had walked off. Some had paid-for copies in their hands, waiting for my autograph. With Uncle Ben's question, though—silence. Silence from everyone in attendance, from me, and, in particular, from this boy; his face flushed and his eyes struggled for a safe place to look. It was the store manager who coughed and said perhaps it would be best to discuss it in private, after the book signing. The boy looked relieved. I felt the moment had only been delayed.

I don't remember how many books I signed at this event. Not many, I suppose, but I know I was distracted. My signature, normally poor anyway, appeared completely illegible. I forgot customers' names, misspelled a few in their purchased copies, and then they were gone. I raised my stare and saw Uncle Ben near the glass doors. He had his grandson by the arm, gently trying to pull him toward me. The boy, red-faced and leaning away from his grandfather, slipped Uncle Ben's grip and pushed through the doors. Uncle Ben smiled at me, shrugged, and followed his grandson to the sidewalk.

The question—*What advice do you have for someone like him; like you?*—remained. I tried to ignore it, but felt like a coward. If I have lived the experience of my father's death and wrote a book about it, don't I have advice to give, at least to people like this boy; for people like me? To say I have advice to give to someone like this boy implies that he is like me based on the respective deaths of our fathers. The premise of the question presented the problem.

I've wondered about this ever since I heard the question, *What advice do you have for someone like him; like you?* When asked by Uncle Ben, I had no idea what I was going to say to his grandson. I was relieved to see him go even though he was my brother's age at the time of our father's death and my brother and I had finally talked things over. I kept thinking, Who the hell am I to give advice about losing a loved one far too young?

After hearing Uncle Ben's question, later that night, struggling to fall asleep, I asked myself, How many people have seen death? Probably many if not all during the course of a full life. But how many people have seen death from a few feet away, of their fathers, when they were eight years old? Especially the death of such a good father, and a death so bloody. Is that what makes me and my siblings unique? I rejected that notion and still do. Being in the minority is not the same thing as being the only one or even unique. And sooner or later no one is

in the minority when it comes to death.

In the writers' group I belong to, I saw a flaw among the memoir writers' submissions when dealing with the death of a loved one. Their words read as though singling the dead person out as being unique among all others: *Don't you see? This person who died too young was my husband; my soul-mate; my child – dead far too soon because of an accident; violence; cancer!*

To these writers, the deaths of their loved ones were singular experiences and life-changing events. What happened in their memoir-writing efforts, however, was that the writers wanted to tell the readers everything about their lost loved ones. Instead of writing a true memoir, they submitted pages of detailed facts, events, descriptions, and emotions about their lost loved ones. Each memoir became less of a memoir and more of an owner's manual, a list of admirable qualities. This resulted in troublesome manuscripts because they unintentionally turned matters into a comparison – that the too-soon loss of the writer's loved one was somehow more painful, profound, or tragic than the readers' relationships and experiences with their lost loved ones. In essence, without a story to tell, there was no memoir to write, and the people grieving were likely writing for their own catharsis. But they will not complete a true memoir, not without a structured story, at least not one anybody else outside the immediate family would want to read.

My father was a good man, a good husband, and a good father. He also flooded a submarine when he was in the Navy, gave us rides on his motorcycle that would make today's Children Services workers scream and, while driving south into Chicago on his way to Florida with my mother, brother, and sister, finally realized he had left me in my crib in a suburb north of the city. These anecdotes, though, would not comprise a memoir-length book without a story to structure them. I loved my father as much as an eight-year-old boy could know how to love his father. However, I would not pretend to believe my love for him ever exceeded the love any other eight-year-boy could have for his own good father.

What advice do I have for someone like me, for Uncle Ben's grandson? If I could go back in time to that presentation at Barnes & Noble, I think I would give the same advice I'd give the memoir writers writing about the loss of a loved one who died too soon. Perhaps I would tell the boy I'm sorry and that no one is like me or like you, and certainly not when it comes to the death of our fathers. The experiences and the hardships are yours. While there may be similarities, it would be wrong for me to even try to make comparisons. If I said I have answers for you, if I even pretended to believe our experiences are alike, I would cheapen both our individual tragedies. Even now I'm trying to figure things out, and at least that helps me remember all the good things about my father. The point of my novel was to tell a story, that's all.

I've re-read the previous paragraph several times, edited it every time I've read it and would edit it again if I read it again, which proves my answer's inaccuracy. Maybe it's not the stuff of best-sellers. I'm okay with it. There's no reason to read the paragraph to this boy now because he's twenty-three as I'm writing this, and he seems to be doing okay.

Besides, even back then he knew enough not to wait around for my answer.

and audio book voiced by Emmy-winning actor-writer Craig J. Harris), *My Occasional Torment* (adapted into a sold-out stage play, Naperville, IL), *An Assassinated Man* (inspired by a true story of murder and mistaken identity), and *Allen's Rocket* (a children's chapter book, which he edited but which was written by his son at the age of 6). Steinberg is an attorney and the humor/slice-of-life Footloose columnist for the monthly print magazine *Silent Sports*. His freelance feature stories have appeared in Chicago-area newspapers, including the *Daily Herald* and *Northwest Herald*.

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