

The Birth of The Taste of Salt

BY MARTHA SOUTHGATE

The first inkling of what grew into *The Taste of Salt* developed when I was the books editor of *Essence* magazine, many years ago. A colleague's husband had what I thought was the coolest job I'd ever heard of. He was (and is) an ichthyologist (a scientist who specializes in the study of fish) at the American Museum of Natural History. Though I have no scientific background, I have always loved the water and could not stop thinking about how I might make the ocean and someone who loved it part of my next novel—I had already published one, *The Fall of Rome*, by that time. Though the novel took a long and winding road away from that initial inspiration, that is where it began.

When I began work on the book in earnest, all I had was that notion and the beginnings of the voice of my protagonist, Josie Henderson, a headstrong woman who loves the water and has fought her way into this white-male-dominated field. As I spent time with her, I came to feel that I wanted to write about where she came from, what made her tick, and what made her run. And I wanted her to be from Cleveland, my hometown.

Cleveland has always gotten a hard way to go in pop culture—"the mistake on the lake," the hapless sports teams, the disappearing industries. And yet, it's a place where hundreds of thousands of people live, love, make their lives and their homes. I have to admit that like Josie, when I left there, I swore I wasn't ever going back. But I had Cleveland be her hometown, too, because even though you might not go home again, you can't ever fully leave where you're from. The need to run is a big part of Josie's character, something I began to work out in the very earliest days of working on the novel. While working on this essay, I found some notes that I made in 2005 when I was thinking about how the novel might develop: "This story is about her heedlessness, her desire to let go of whatever's near her, her efforts to keep herself in control . . . She's scared and uncertain and a little wild."

And here's another note from that same page or two

The Birth of The Taste of Salt

of rumination, the birth of the other major theme of the book: “One big change today—have her go home and find out her brother’s an addict. Parents flipping out. That’s what she has to deal with when she gets home. Getting him into rehab or something. No sick dad. Let dad live and be present. Two parents. Crazy. And maybe we can build the marital conflict by rolling back through it. Let her relationship with her parents reflect her discomfort with her heritage, her hometown.” Then I have a note to myself to begin researching “fish, addiction, water-related jobs.” That’s how it started, that one thought one day.

I’ve long been interested in the mechanisms and effects of addiction, but when I began work on this book, I had no idea it would become such a central theme. But that’s what’s great about writing fiction, the mystery of it, even as you do it. Eudora Welty once said, “If you haven’t surprised yourself, you haven’t written.” Those words are part of why I write fiction, to attempt to surprise readers—and myself—with some aspect of story, some aspect of life, that they didn’t expect to find. I hope that readers of *The Taste of Salt* will find themselves surprised and moved. I hope that they will find themselves thinking of how one lives in a family in a slightly different way.

Questions for Discussion

1. Josie, the protagonist of *The Taste of Salt*, is deeply tied to two places: Cleveland, Ohio, her birthplace, and Woods Hole, where she makes her life and work. She has very different relationships to each place. Discuss the ways in which the two places differ from one another. To what extent do they function as characters in the novel?
2. Josie's father, Ray, and her brother, Tick, both struggle with alcoholism and other addictions. Does Josie harbor any addictions of her own?
3. While there is alcoholism in the African-American community, as in any other community in the United States, relatively few memoirs or novels have been published about it. Why do you think that might be the case?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

4. The author uses an interweaving narrative in which each of the six major characters speaks periodically and Josie serves as a kind of overarching consciousness going in and out of various characters' lives. Other novels that have taken this approach to a greater or lesser degree in recent years are Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Why do you think Southgate uses this narrative approach?
5. Josie struggles with both the family she came from and with conflicting feelings about being one of the only black scientists in her milieu. Why might successful people try to leave their past (and their families) behind? Do you think it's ever possible to do that?
6. On page 130, Josie says that she doesn't want to "fit the stereotype of black girl with a no 'count brother." Do you think there is such a stereotype? What do you think of Josie's comment or of the way it bonds her to her friend Maren?
7. The characters in the Henderson family have wildly varying reactions to the culture and tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous. What do you think of their range of responses? Are you familiar with the organization? If you are, what are your feelings about it?