

CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



***Red Clay Suzie* is described as a novel inspired by true events. How did you create your protagonist Philbet?**

I looked inside myself. I examined my insecurities, my doubts and fears, my failed and my successful relationships, my small triumphs, in short, my life growing up as a gay, physically misshapen boy in a rural, deeply conservative family and community in Georgia.

Philbet was inside of me, long suppressed. I just had to coax him out, which I did writing furiously on my mobile telephone commuting on the subway (pre-pandemic) to and from my work at the Library of Congress. Creating Philbet was certainly part self-examination and catharsis. But it was also part Southern storytelling, with all that beloved form's beautiful quirks and wonderful eccentricities.

Jeffrey grew up in Warm Springs, Georgia and attended LaGrange College, just a few miles down the road. There, he received a degree in speech, communications, and theatre, furiously writing in journals that would become the basis of his debut novel. After graduation he moved to Washington, DC for an acting job, if you call cavorting about at a Renaissance Fair acting. He was welcomed by a vibrant community of theatre pros and decided to stay. Later he bid that world goodbye and took his love of storytelling to other jobs, other challenges. Today he lives with his partner and wee Petunia, their toy poodle in the city where he works at the Library of Congress surrounded by books and people who love them.

How did you choose the novel's title, and what does it signify for you?

Georgia soil is rich in iron oxides, which gives it a distinctive reddish hue, almost the color of terra cotta. Like our peaches, it says "Georgia" to me. And "Suzie," well, I can't give that away. What I will say is that it's as much a part of Philbet as "fixin' to," "over yonder," and "sad-streak pound cake with a green milkshake chaser." I dare not reveal more, bless your heart.

What challenges did you encounter in writing *Red Clay Suzie* and what advice do you have to other debut novelists?

The toughest part of designing and building my book was never veering from my premise, which became a mental discipline as I decided which real-life experiences distracted from my narrative arc. Not every realization or confrontation (however defining they may have been) served the story I was intent on telling. It can be wrenching to relegate an unforgettable memory to the rubbish bin if it gets in the way. But it's still vital to stick to the premise. As the saying goes: if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there.



What literature inspires you?

I read voraciously and draw inspiration from so many books. Among the authors whose books currently reside on the shelf in my office are Christopher Castellani, Jesmyn Ward, Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Conner, Rasheed Newson, Bushra Rehman, Zak Salih, Rafael Frumkin, and Ralph Eubanks, and M.F.K. Fisher. Why? Because their writing tunnels deep inside my heart and mind, provoking an examination of a piece of myself, my relationships, and my world view. And, they know how to grab me by the lapels and not let go until they’re ready. Literary journeys and those who take us on them are something close to sacred.

If you could start a new movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be?

Rather than start a new movement, I would try to breathe additional life into the important work being done by such groups as the Born This Way Foundation and The Trevor Project. Both help at-risk youth realize that they are not alone in their struggles, that there are resources available to them to navigate through whatever difficulties they face. In fact, I am donating a portion of the proceeds from the sale of *Red Clay Suzie* to those two organizations whose work I so admire.



What do you want readers to take away from the novel?

Foremost, it is my fondest hope that *Red Clay Suzie* readers—even those who have never been relegated to outsider status—come to see that bullies are paper predators who have no more power than you yourself give them.

They are as scared of life as you, and once you understand that, they lose their sovereignty. And I want them to know that whatever imperfections (real and perceived) their body may have, it is beautiful; it is precious. Like Philbet, I came to learn that there are caring individuals in those concentric circles of people around you if you will only open your heart and your mind. Oh, and love—real love—is never wrong. Bravely bestow it on whomever is worthy of the gift.

That is what I wish my younger self had known. That is Philbet's story.