

PEACH by Wayne Barton: Author Q&A

Fish Out of Water Books, JANUARY 15, 2019. www.fowbooks.com/peach

ISBN: 978-1-947886-02-5. 320 pages. \$16.99 paperback.

PEACH is a complex, multilayered story spread over two continents, exploring themes such as: relationships and responsibilities; our purpose in life; dealing with loss and coming to terms with our mortality; the idea of home; and the concept of fame. Can you provide us with a brief overview?

I wanted to write a story that blurred the lines between protagonist and antagonist. I was always intrigued by the character of Randle McMurphy in Ken Kesey's brilliant *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Of course, this character is brilliantly portrayed by Jack Nicholson in the movie too—the idea of a really sickening violent rapist who is effectively the hero in the story, and not really because of any redemptive circumstances or journey. PEACH is nothing like that in terms of story, it's far more tame, but the idea and concept of villains and heroes is a basic trope for any storyteller.

In life we encounter people we like and people we dislike and they become our heroes and villains, and we define our relationships in absolute terms—particularly romantic ones, but also friendships—but the truth is that we do this because we're conditioned to do so. I wanted to go against that and give my protagonist, for want of a better phrase considering what I said earlier, a complete journey in the pages, despite knowing that it is fluid beyond the boundaries of the front and back cover.

You have stated that PEACH was, in part, inspired by your work as a ghostwriter and the profound impact that fleeting, transient connections can have on our lives. Can you expand on this?

This is a story I've always wanted to write, but I never was able to fully articulate. For example, the idea about starts and ends in relationships, or, for example, being a product of your environment; we all are, really, so it took expanding my own horizons in order to get where I wanted to be with the story. Surrounding myself with intelligent, creative, brilliant people gave me so much inspiration that I felt blessed to be able to tap into this part of myself that I didn't even know existed.

I have said *fleeting* but I think what I meant by that is a moment in time—and a moment in time can be one second, one minute, or it could be six months. You can have a defining moment or a defining period. And you can have more than one of course. I think the message in PEACH is represented by that period of time where you don't quite expect change to come or you aren't necessarily prepared for the scale of that change.

And yet sometimes there's an element of human nature where we rely on external inspiration or intervention to help us realise or emotionally articulate something we were internalising. You could say in that respect it's like art imitating life, but then there's always that fluidity to it.

How long did it take to write PEACH and was it written at one time?

The idea existed as a rudimentary screenplay around ten or eleven years ago. I'd always had the idea that if I ever wrote a novel I would revisit this story and tell it how I wanted it to be told.

The interesting thing is that from the idea of it to now, a period of time just before its publication, I know that it was necessary for my own growth in terms of experience as a writer and a person before it was written. I had ideas about life and the meaning of our existence, yet I was previously never able to fully articulate them. But working with so many interesting people as a ghostwriter, I've had conversations that did help to unlock those themes and ideas. When it came to writing the story, the ideas flowed easily, and I'm sure that if I had tried to do so just two years prior, it would not have been the same. But the entire novel was written in one go, obviously with revisions and edits that came after.

Did you have the framework and locations for the entire story in mind before you began writing? How, for instance, did you decide upon Idaho?

One of the major changes from the original, rough idea was that it was a tour with a band, which then changed to being just one person in one setting. It needed to be isolated for Freddie to be attracted to the idea, somewhere that was far enough away from glamorous locations so that at least two of the people in the story seemed out of place and yet perfectly at home. Idaho has the perfect balance of everything I wanted in the story and the more I researched the state and the various locations, it seemed even more perfect. There are just so many elements to why it had to be Idaho and I don't think now, looking at the story as a whole, it would quite have the same feel if it was set anywhere else.

Are any of the characters in PEACH based on real people?

Not intentionally. There are ideas and themes and conversations that are based on variations of conversations I have had. But to me the characters are their own people. It seems strange if I now tried to project the idea of them being based on anyone.

Who are your favorite characters?

I've gone back and forth on this and I admit to changing my mind. Leaving aside the point of "favorite" being this suggestion that some are less likeable, which as I've mentioned wasn't really my objective, my personal favorites—this week at least—are Hal and Louise.

Who is your target audience and what would you like readers to take away from reading PEACH?

It's a tough question, because almost the entire premise of writing the story is how everyone's own journey is subjective, and yet, of course, whenever you write or create something there is a purpose and my own ideas within that.

I would like to think readers of any age could enjoy it. I would hope that it is a book that would give the reader cause to think, that there is something in there where someone might be able to interpret a meaningful message. Whenever you are creating something artistic, I think it's important that people are able to interpret something you have created in their own way. If they can, then you have at least been somewhat successful.

After suffering the loss of a close friend and learning that his new colleague, Hal Granger, is living on borrowed time, Freddie becomes consumed by the concept of time and how to make the most of one's time on earth, how to seize the day. How does one make the most of every day?

It's such a personal question. Time well-spent for one might well be time wasted for another. My perception is blessed with the privilege of being able to do something I enjoy every day. I know many people who aren't able to be in a job they love or that they feel is meaningful or fulfilling. Yet so many of those people might benefit from altering their own perception, because the world needs variety to progress—so what is worthwhile might not be fulfilling, and I suppose you could say the other way around.

It was fulfilling for me writing "Peach." Will it resonate with readers? I don't know. Does its reception determine its value? It's such a personal thing. To be honest it's one of those questions that could dominate my days if I let it. I worked with Gordon Jago, the former soccer coach, a few of years ago, and he talks about *time* as an enemy and a friend. It really can be both.

In the song "I'm Not the One" from his album, "ArrangingTime," Pete Yorn sings the line: "In this world are we just strangers, when we fail to make a connection." Pete was kind enough to provide you with a handwritten version of this lyric for inclusion in the front matter to "Peach." You have stated that, in many ways, this line sums up the essence of "Peach." Can you explain what you mean?

I recently started recording a series of podcasts to help promote the book, and the first person I spoke with was Pete, and we talked about that line and the question. I think it summarises everything about the story on a truly fundamental level and it's such a great question that asks us so much about the value of ourselves and the perception of that value, and also, how well do we truly know ourselves? We constantly surprise ourselves and it sometimes takes unexpected relationships to bring about these revelations.

Freddie also ponders the question of whether it is more important to speak one's own truth than to simply know it. What do you think?

Definitely knowing it. Perhaps there's a grey area in the value of importance of speaking the truth, but I think that is more to do with timing and diplomacy, so it has to come back to knowing it.

One of the main themes in PEACH is an exploration of the meaning of *home*. I was particularly struck by the Freddie stating that "home, at least for me, was people, people you belonged to, and with." Can you expand on this thought?

It's one of those things I truly believe. You can be anywhere in the world, and as long as you are with people you love, then you can feel at home. I know that there is the perception of home being one place and I suppose that is true, but honestly now I can say home and it can mean any one of four or five places. Maybe it's a place you feel comfortable and a place you feel you belong, but it doesn't necessarily have to be defined by a dwelling or a location. It often is, of course, but I think that part of how that statement is made in the story is because of Freddie realising who he is, how he's changed, what he has, and what he stands to lose.

Another important theme in the book is the concept of fame, or, rather, the myth of fame as an ideal. As a ghostwriter, you have interviewed a number of celebrities and have stated that you particularly enjoy, beyond what a celebrity might be known for, the deeper conversations about our life in general. In the book, Hal, the ex-rock star now living in rural Idaho, says that it is "better to be loved by those who know you than those who don't." Has fame, as in the idea of fame vs. the reality been a common thread when talking with celebrities?

In some respects it has. I mean, it's been a question I've asked and a topic we've discussed, but I can't say that it's ever been something which has ever been a dominant theme. It's been one of those things I've often wondered about; because I consider the people I've worked with to be normal people who just so happen to be famous. Well, normal, incredibly gifted people, but down-to-earth. The illusion of fame or the idea of it in conversation has mostly been about the changing nature of the entertainment industry in the twenty-first century.

These days everything is so accessible and so people feel more accessible. As far as PEACH is concerned, Hal is fully aware of these passages of time and in so much more of a way than many others, has the privilege of controlling his own exposure, I guess. He just puts a different value on things in life, and he determines his own currency. He is, indeed, in a position and time in his life where he can afford to do that, but I think it comes through in his character, so he sees other people who have this respect in the area and community where he lives, and he respects that and places that above what he was able to do because of a talent he had. I have been fortunate that most people I have worked with have had this humility about them; that fame is a side effect of doing something that they love, but it is the thing they love, expressing themselves through performance, which is more important than fame. In many respects the

expression is a form of therapy, and the success and ability to earn a living from that is a pleasant consequence more than a means to an end.

How long have you been writing fiction?

At the end of 2014, with the fortune of a few published sports books behind me, I had this idea that I wanted to try something new in writing every year, as much as I possibly could, in order to keep it fresh. So I wrote a fiction story and sent it to a publisher I'd been in contact with. Rudling House had published the autobiography of former MUTV presenter Ally Begg and the Manchester United website I help run ran a review on it. I sent the story to Karen at Rudling House just for feedback, and to my surprise and delight she said she wanted to publish it. Now having this belief that I could write something that someone would find interesting, I decided to take the plunge and write "Peach," which I guess you could say is "the story I was born to write."

There is going to be a soundtrack album of original songs, written and performed by Charles Baker (known for his role as Skinny Pete in "Breaking Bad"). Can you tell us how the idea of creating a soundtrack album for PEACH arose?

One of Charles' most famous scenes in Breaking Bad is where Skinny Pete plays the piano. There are the scenes where Walter White says "say my name" or "I am the danger," but one of the most renowned scenes of the supporting cast is that of Skinny Pete playing the piano. It was great writing but it couldn't have been possible without Charles' ability.

Working with Charles and getting to know him, I found out that music is a huge part of his life. I had heard some songs he had written and performed and enjoyed them, but it was maybe a year after that. I had already written "Peach," and as a very amateur and poor guitar player and singer I considered that I could write something which could pass as a song, well, I'd written these things for the story, these skeleton structures of ideas for songs.

I don't know if I dreamed it or it randomly came to me, but I just had the thought of Charlie possibly doing something with them, and then that thought was there for a while before I dared ask. I think I only plucked up the courage to ask because it started to feel to me as if it had to be Charlie, and he's done what I think is a great job. It really enhances the story for me and makes it more of an immersive experience.

I haven't written conventional songs: normally you might have verse chorus, verse chorus, bridge, chorus chorus, whereas mine might be verse verse chorus, verse chorus verse, verse verse verse outro, so I can imagine for Charles it's been very challenging, but his interpretation has been better than anything I could have imagined. He has got some talented people on board to help produce it, but I love the demos so much too.

If PEACH were made into a movie, who do you envision playing the main characters?

This is one people often ask and again maybe it's just how it happened but the characters in the book all sort of became their own people when I was writing. That said people have made their suggestions: for Hal they have been people as diverse as Kris Kristofferson, James Earl-Jones or Meat Loaf. In the Louise role, I always imagined Catherine Keener; she has such a wise and motherly aura. Beyond that I just invite people to project their own ideas.

You have written a sequel to PEACH named "Orange," as well as a prequel named "Green." Can you explain how you chose the "color" titles for the three books? Did you have a trilogy in mind from the outset?

I honestly didn't when I started writing, but maybe halfway through I thought about Hal and his own back story, and I realised I wanted to know more about it, so that's how that came about. Then, everyone who was beta-reading PEACH asked what happened to all of the characters and it made writing that next part a logical step.

At that point, it was still very much a case of not knowing what to call it, but knowing I wanted something which would fit a series. The idea of colour psychology came into my head, and it helped that there isn't really a theme like that. I liked peach as a colour, and the themes of peach in psychology fit the story perfectly. Then I just thought it was natural to go that way. It feels absolutely right.