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Tallerman takes on big topics in short stories

by Shant Shahrigian

Local fiction writer Bruce Tallerman's short story "When You Were Jamie" is many things. The tale evokes the anxieties of adolescence, skepticism about religion and a rich tableau of emotions in scenes in Van Cortlandt Park, an unnamed Israeli settlement and the backseat of a black Corvette.

The story about a woman's transition from a wild youth to a pious adulthood, told from her younger brother's perspective, won the author his third Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO) award for artistic excellence from the Bronx Council on the Arts earlier this year.



Bruce Tallerman at his home office.

Photo: Marisol Diaz/Riverdale Press

During an interview at his home office on Hudson Manor Terrace, Mr. Tallerman said he often culls experiences from his life for his stories. "When You Were Jamie" is a fictionalized take on his real-life sister's ardent conversion to Orthodox Judaism.

"There are some very vivid characters from my own life that provide a springboard for my stories," Mr. Tallerman said. "Some people say that writing is therapy. I think for me, that would be true."

He added that some recurring themes have emerged in his eight published stories to date. Mr. Tallerman said he finds himself occupied with his father's alcoholism and the idea of income inequality. In his "Highway Song," a father-son road trip to boarding schools goes awry, and in "Lost Men," a successful man has an unexpected reunion with a down-and-out relative.

"I think all writing is autobiographical, even science fiction," Mr. Tallerman said. "Ideas don't just come from nowhere. It's how you transmute those ideas into your own fictional universe."

Mr. Tallerman, 57, embarked on fiction later in life than many literary scribes. He said he was working as a television writer in Los Angeles about 20 years ago, when he decided to start writing short stories instead.

"The whole process of writing for TV is, you are one voice in a sea of voices," he said. "What I loved about [fiction] was, it was all mine. I really loved the process of just getting my own ideas down on paper and crafting them into stories."

During his transition, Mr. Tallerman received some encouragement from William Styron. Before Mr. Tallerman was ever published, the literary great replied to a letter from the younger writer telling him to stick with fiction and that the odds would eventually turn in his favor.

Along with his short stories, Mr. Tallerman works in marketing. While words are the stock in trade of both vocations, the author does not see his day job as particularly influential on his passion.

One upshot of his job in Manhattan is that the hour-long commutes to and from work give Mr. Tallerman time to write fiction on his laptop.

A self-described expert in finding a seat on the No. 1 train, he claims the sounds and other sensory impositions do not disturb him.

“It’s the only time I have to write,” he said. “Yes, there’s noise. There are people shoving at me. But as long as I can get a seat, I can sit there and write.”

After winning the BRIO for the third time, Mr. Tallerman, who has taught creative writing at The Riverdale Y, the Gotham Writers Workshop and other organizations, said he plans to back off from applying for the award again.

The Bronx Council on the Arts requires BRIO winners to do a service project to receive all \$3,000 of their awards. Mr. Tallerman is yet to pick a project for this year, but is likely to teach classes like he did the last two times. During the interview, he summed up his attitude toward the craft.

“I don’t write thinking, how am I going to get people to love this?” he said. “I just want to love it myself. I think that if I do, other people will, too.”