

ONLINE INTERVIEW:
WWW.JOHNBVALERI.WORDPRESS.COM

What inspired you to write THE STEPHEN HAWKING DEATH ROW FAN CLUB – and what do you hope this collection achieves when taken as a whole?

The title story, the first of these I wrote, was very loosely based on an incident in a maximum security prison. I did, in fact, bring the Hawking book to a death row inmate there. The story worked out pretty well, I thought, so I decided to use some of its characters in other ones. I should add that the stories don't all stem from my own experiences. A friend of my sister, a woman who lived in another state, was raped. The assailant was caught, tried, and received a long sentence. This state had a program that brought together victims and victimizers. That became the inspiration for "One to One."

About your second question: I hope the collection gives readers a sense of what life's like in a jail or prison– the sounds, smells, danger, lack of privacy, deprivations and small pleasures – the whole package. I hope it conveys a sense of what it's like to work there. I hope it captures the aftermath of a violent crime – what it means to be raped, or to lose a daughter in a senseless murder. (While I don't know these things first-hand, thank God, I've dealt with plenty of people who do). Finally, I hope it makes the point that inmates are still human, despite their crimes – that they're more like the rest of us than we like to acknowledge.

- 1) How did you find the process of writing fiction to compare to that of non-fiction – and what are the liberties that you are able to take when left to your own imagination?**

Well, I try to be meticulously accurate with nonfiction, to get the facts right. With nonfiction I can take a person or event and tailor it for specific purposes: to make a point, to add drama or humor, to have people do what I want them to, or what I think they should do. Real life isn't like that very often, as I imagine you've noticed.

One of the biggest and occasionally rewarding challenges of fiction, in my view, is to write about a protagonist who's radically different from me. My favorite example of this in the Hawking collection is a story called "Hater," about a violent neo-Nazi. In writing it, I speculated as to how he got that

way. I'm non-violent, and I'm Jewish, so it was almost completely a product of my imagination. I should add that the protagonist isn't modeled on any single person; he's a composite.

- 2) Though these stories are fiction, they are grounded in reality. In what ways has your background informed your writing – and how do you endeavor to balance authenticity with creative license?

I believe the writer's background almost always plays a role in writing fiction, to one degree or another. Certainly my own background (male, middle class, Midwesterner, history major, doctor) comes into a lot of my work. You can write about people unlike yourself, and about things of which you know next to nothing, but it's tricky. You have to do your homework, and you should talk directly with those with the expertise you lack. An example: My college roommate and close friend practiced criminal law for thirty years. He helped me immeasurably when I tried to write about the legal system.

To answer your other question: I don't think there's an inherent conflict between authenticity and creative license. A good historical novelist will balance them routinely. Consider Hilary Mantel or the late great E.L. Doctorow.

- 3) You illuminate some of the very real darkneses that punctuate life. What are the benefits of understanding these circumstances and situations – and how can humor serve those who are working, or living, within these difficult realities

We can derive hope from the survivorship of others; we can learn something of how they managed to go on despite their circumstances. That's a key component of group therapy and the 12-step programs, all of which can be profoundly beneficial.

Humor is often a key part of that survival. Unsurprisingly it flourishes in places like hospitals and battlefields and prisons, places where hope can be at a premium. Part of Shakespeare's genius was his brilliant use of humor, the comic relief that flows through his tragedies. A more recent example is Frank McCourt's Angela's Ashes. He could write something that's heart-breaking, something that makes you want to stop reading it, but the next page could be hilarious.

- 4) What advice would you to those who have the desire to write but have yet to harness their creative energies?

The most important advice would be: just start. You'll always find reasons not to — you're too tired, or your job is more onerous than usual, or the World Series is on, or any one of a million others. Learn to ignore them, or at least some of them. Equally important: be prepared to write badly when you start. You will, at first, but you'll get better. That's true of almost all endeavors, from brain surgery to playing the trombone. Finally: read everything, from Homer to Stephen King. Try to ascertain what makes good writing good, and vice versa. It's been said that almost all of literature is theft, so steal carefully.