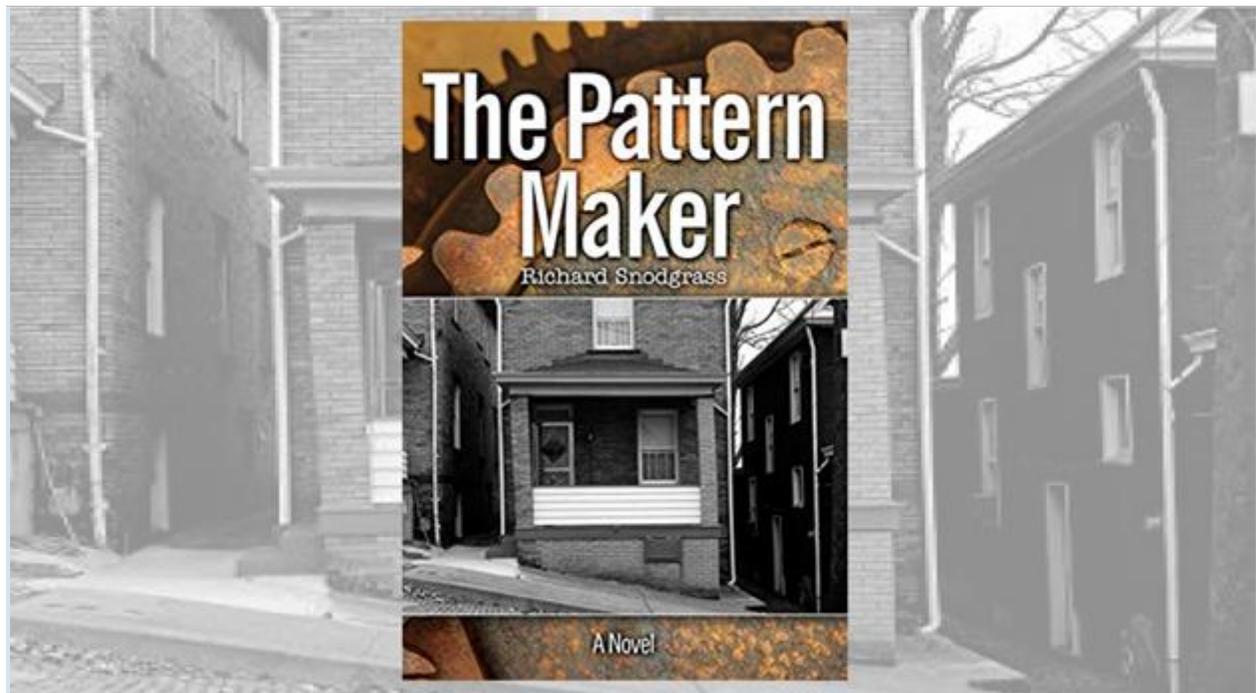


KIRKUS

PROFILES

An interview with Richard Snodgrass

BY ALEC HARVEY • APRIL 27, 2020



Like the beatniks he encountered as a student at the University of California, Berkeley, and later, living in San Francisco for a decade and a half, Richard Snodgrass walks to the beat of his own drum.

So it's not really surprising that after scoring critical acclaim in 1989 with his debut novel, *There's Something in the Back Yard*, the author took a job as a writer and producer at a Pittsburgh advertising agency, then spent more than three decades writing and self-publishing his Furnass Series, which comprises 10 books set in a fictional Pennsylvania mill town.

They're all written now, and the sixth in the series, *The Pattern Maker*, comes out in May. It's the story of a former Green Beret named Paul, a husband and father who has a seemingly normal life in Furnass but finds himself caught up in a platonic love affair, murder, and more as he steals off to nearby Pittsburgh for some excitement.

Snodgrass, who has lived in Pittsburgh since 1984, plays with perspective in the gripping *The Pattern Maker*. As he does in his other novels, the author uses intermittent italicized passages that he refers to as “rondos.” “Their purpose is to let the reader know what’s going on with the other characters, and sometimes what’s going on in the wider world, while the action of the story [continues],” he says.

In *The Pattern Maker*, those passages add up to one 15,000-word sentence that tells us how Paul’s story intersects with those of a young intern on a film set, her famous director, his wife, a mysterious drifter, and a wannabe actor as well as the brutal murder of a young woman in a Pittsburgh park.

Snodgrass’ fictional Furnass is not unlike Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, the mill town where he grew up, about 30 miles northwest of Pittsburgh. He began writing in college, where he studied English. After graduating from Berkeley, he found a life among “the beatniks, folk musicians, and whatever came before hippies” in San Francisco. He wrote short stories and made a living as a construction inspector on high-rise buildings. “When I was about 35, I realized the people and artists I knew in town all considered me a construction worker with a hobby, rather than a serious artist who had to earn a living,” he says. So he hit the road, living on grants and doing housesitting gigs for friends. While housesitting in Syracuse, New York, he wrote the photo-filled memoir *The House With Round Windows* (1977), about his childhood home.

In 1980, Snodgrass moved back into the family home to help his 80-year-old widowed mother. He lived in the attic, where he finished *There’s Something in the Back Yard*, a mystical novel that *Kirkus Reviews* calls “a striking debut” and the *Christian Science Monitor* lauds as “a skillful blend of Hopi legend and middle-class marital lore.”

By the time *There’s Something in the Back Yard* was published, Snodgrass had married and moved to Pittsburgh, where he began working at an advertising agency. (He turns 80 in April and still works with a few clients.) He also had started writing *The Building*, the first of what the author planned to be a Furnass trilogy. That trilogy turned into a decades-long endeavor that now encompasses 10 volumes that play with different genres.

Aside from an ever-growing mystery—one murder turns into more—*The Pattern Maker* is a captivating character study, a look at a former military man suffering from PTSD before our very eyes (and long before we gave the disorder a name). Snodgrass brings his characters, especially Paul, the intern Suzy, and a panhandler named Sam, to vivid life.

The Pattern Maker is set in the mid-’70s, with the Vietnam War, some brutal assassinations, and other violent incidents etched into the psyche of the times. And though the time frame is almost 50 years ago, its themes resonate today, as in a passage early in the book when Paul mistakes a movie-set car crash for the real thing, rushing toward it to help. A fellow onlooker, who turns out to be Sam, commiserates with him:

It's an easy mistake to make these days, confusing the fake with the real. Because the media, the entertainment industry, the government, they all want you to be unable to tell the one from the other. News isn't news nowadays if it isn't entertaining, and the stars of our entertainment have to generate news if they want to be a success, and they're usually more entertaining than the movies they produce.

Snodgrass has finished the 10th book in the Furnass series, and his short stories and essays have appeared in the *New England Review*, *California Review*, *Pittsburgh Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He also is a photographer, publishing the collections *An Uncommon Field*, about the temporary memorial for 9/11's Flight 93, and *Kitchen Things*, featuring vintage utensils.

His writing inspirations come largely from across the Atlantic. "I was once accused by an editor here in the States, who said I'm the most British of American writers, and the writers I treasure are all English and British—William Trevor, James Joyce, Barry Unsworth, Ian McEwen," Snodgrass says. "There's not an American writer that I identify with after Ken Kesey, whose *Sometimes a Great Notion* is the best...since Faulkner."

Right now, Snodgrass is reading Alice Munro's short stories as well as a trilogy by British writer Rachel Cusk. He writes three or four hours a day and spends the rest of the day with his wife, Marty, and their two cats. "We watch British mysteries on TV, and we read a lot," Snodgrass says. "It's the happiest time of my life."

Alec Harvey, past president of the Society for Features Journalism, is a freelance writer based in Alabama.