

## BookLife Talks with Richard Snodgrass

After calling *Torn* “ambitious” and “vividly detailed” and saying it “demonstrates that Snodgrass knows his patch of America like Faulkner knew Yoknapatawpha,” it’s no wonder BookLife Reviews designated it an Editor’s Pick. We spoke with the author about his long-running series and its historical inspiration.

***Torn* is the 11th book in the Books of Furnass series. How did you initially conceive of the series and has it changed from your initial vision?**

I never intended to write a series. I thought I’d write one novel, *The Building*, about constructing a high-rise, 12-story tower in a mill town. But I got interested in the local characters, so I wrote a follow-up, *Some Rise*. Except the second book threw off some parts of the first book, which meant having to rewrite some of the first book, which meant in turn having to rewrite some parts of the second book. But I felt there were still elements of the overall story left hanging, so I wrote a third book, *All Fall Down*, but that of course threw off parts of the first two books, and rewriting those threw off parts of the third book—well, you get the idea. Which explains why it was 40 years before I felt all the books were stable enough within themselves to start publishing them.

**What made you choose to set *Torn* at the tail end of the Great Depression with a disfigured soldier as the main character?**

The time frame for *Torn* was actually established by the novel that preceded it, *All That Will Remain*, where John Lincoln’s fall from a troopship in New York Harbor was first reported. His body was never found, and everyone assumed he was dead—even me—but a couple of my friends said, “Suppose he lived through it, what then?” Something must have delayed his reappearance, and I knew of the horrendous facial injuries during WWI, so from there the novel pretty much wrote itself. I just tried to keep up, excited to see what would happen next.

**While the city of Furnass is fictional, it mirrors actual mill towns. What kind of historical research did you do to bring the characters and town to life?**

Many of the Furnass books could be called literary historical fiction, tracing the town from its beginnings, so I did extensive research on the region’s background. For instance, I found that in the 1600s, an unnamed group

of Indians lived here for a brief period; my theory is that they were a Hopi clan on their migration. I also found that the famous Highland regiment, the Black Watch, who appear in several books, was here in the mid-1760s; and in 1863, Morgan’s Raiders passed through mysteriously just before the Battle of Gettysburg—a mystery I address in *Across the River*.

**How do you imagine readers at this moment will connect to *Torn*?**

During the recent Covid-19 pandemic, most of us, like John Lincoln—though for a very different reason—had the unsettling experience of confronting the world from behind a mask. And I think most of us would admit at some time or another to feeling as if everyone is staring at us, looking at us like we’re some kind of freak show. Plus, you are very fortunate indeed if you haven’t felt on occasion as if you were a stranger in a strange land, that land made all the stranger because it should be the most familiar and comforting.

**Can readers expect to see more from the citizens of Furnass?**

As noted earlier, my characters and stories have always tended to wander into my thinking, unannounced

and unsummoned, taking over the place and demanding their due. And I have to admit that lately I’ve heard this knocking on the inner door to my consciousness, soft at first but getting louder, someone new wanting to come in and make themselves at home.

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