

# Stewart O'Nan

BY JESSICA TEISCH



In Stewart O'Nan's 13th novel, *The Odds: A Love Story* (reviewed on page 29), a desperate couple, hoping to avoid foreclosure and save their marriage, leave their Cleveland suburb and head to Niagara Falls's poshest casino to risk it all.

Art and Marion Fowler, the despairing, jobless couple in *The Odds*, join a cast of fictional characters who, on seemingly small canvases (such as the chain restaurant in O'Nan's *Last Night at the Lobster*), tell very large stories about ordinary lives. While there are accidents, kidnappings, murders, and deadly fires, there are also reflections on the more mundane subjects of love, loss, aging, and working-class life. But try as critics might to pigeonhole O'Nan's fiction in a specific genre, the author—a novelist, a nonfiction writer, and a horror writer—is far too subtle and complex for easy categorization.

"I'm drawn to people and behavior that I know is common but I still don't understand," O'Nan (1961–) told *Bookmarks* about his diverse inspirations, "like war, or how love turns to hate, how children turn on their parents, how supposedly good people can do terrible things." Yet if some

of his characters are lurid, and their situations even more so, O'Nan never succumbs to cheap thrills. Instead, in his character-driven novels remarkable for their unflinching eye on situations that lay bare human emotion, he focuses on small acts when life looks grim. "Across the books I see a preoccupation with what people do to get through the days, and what faith they can (or can't) rely on when things go wrong," O'Nan said. "The consequences of not having some kind of faith to keep you going are dire."

O'Nan knows faith. Raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, O'Nan, at his wife's encouragement, traded in a career in aerospace engineering for the riskier life of a writer. It all worked out. After receiving an MFA from Cornell University in 1992, he wrote his first book, *In the Walled City*, an award-winning collection of short stories; the acclaimed *Snow Angels* (1994) followed. In 1996, with three novels under his belt, *Granta* named this self-proclaimed "fiction-writing machine" one of Twenty Best Young American Novelists. Since O'Nan averages a book a year, we expect more good things to come from this American gem.

## THE FIRST NOVEL

### Snow Angels (1994)

◆ PIRATE'S ALLEY FAULKNER PRIZE FOR THE NOVEL

O'Nan's first novel, a literary thriller about the unraveling of family, the souring of love, and the aftermath of two marriages, features working-class people in a small town, a setting he would mine again in later novels. Inspired by a short story from *In the Walled City*, *Snow Angels* is told in the first and third person and in the present and past tense as Arthur remembers and reconstructs his past.

**THE STORY:** When Arthur Parkinson returns to his small, poverty-stricken hometown of Butler, Pennsylvania, one Christmas, he revisits his haunting past and tries to understand the tragedies that forever altered two families. In 1974, when he was just 14, his father left his mother, and he watched his family disintegrate and his own circumstances change. Then, his once-beloved babysitter, the pretty, young, unhappily married Annie Marchand, suffered a misfortune that led to her murder at the hands of her depraved husband. In the end, the adolescent Arthur remains haunted by these tragedies, both of which reveal truths he is still trying to understand.

**THE MOVIE:** *Snow Angels* (2007), starring Sam Rockwell and Kate Beckinsale and directed by David Gordon Green.

**"It is a truthful and deeply sad picture of the American hinterland, which has lost religion and maybe also lost its capacity for sustained love. The book's imagery is wonderfully effective."** MARY BREASTED, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 1/8/1995



unchecked, which is what the culture asks us to do" (<http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/onan/>).

**THE STORY:** As Marjorie Standiford waits on Oklahoma's death row, hours away from her lethal injection, she dictates her memoirs to America's "King of Horror," a writer who resembles Stephen King. Given 114 questions about herself, her lovers, her accomplices, and their crimes, she recounts her crystal meth-fueled role in the infamous "Sonic" drive-in killings. "I was there but I didn't kill anyone," claims the morally vacuous getaway girl. She reveals her predilection for cars and speed; how mainlining speed with her husband, Lamont (the actual trigger man), and her lover, Natalie, grew into speed dealing; and how dealing evolved into robbery and robbery into mass murder in a highway fast food joint. By talking to the King of Horror, Marjorie hopes to set the record straight—and to correct the account told by Natalie in her best seller.

**"Liberally jazzed with humor, gallows and otherwise, Marjorie's account combines the manic rush of *Natural Born Killers* with the dreamy lyricism of *Badlands*. A dexterous blend of suspense and social commentary, *Speed Queen* offers an unflinching take on the land of fast food and fast cars, where everyone is juiced to the max—and no one is really going anywhere."** *PEOPLE*, 5/5/1997

## THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

### A Prayer for the Dying (1999)

In his fifth novel, a Gothic horror and philosophical story, O'Nan forces us to consider just how far removed we are from evil. A tale of human experience, the novel also asks larger questions about faith, culpability, reason, responsibility, and humankind's vulnerability.

**THE STORY:** The psychologically scarred Civil War veteran Jacob Hansen—a sheriff, a preacher, and an undertaker—faces a hard choice when his small prairie town of Friendship, Wisconsin, succumbs to two catastrophic events: a diphtheria outbreak and a summer brush fire. Jacob finds himself in an impossible situation. The town's residents must flee the fire, yet a quarantine must simultaneously be imposed to stop the spread of the disease. With panic erupting and death beckoning at every turn, Jacob sizes up his herculean duties as he starts to question his faith and his role in maintaining an orderly world.

**"Jacob is skewed at a deep level, and our understanding of just how skewed he is emerges so gradually, and so elliptically, that the full impact is felt not in the direct telling but in our sudden lurching grasp of just what this man has done—and what he is capable of doing—as his world turns**



## THE PULP NOVEL

### The Speed Queen (1997)

O'Nan wrote his third novel (after *The Names of the Dead* [1996], a thriller about a Vietnam vet's domestic traumas), while teaching at the University of New Mexico and the University of Central Oklahoma. Wishing to write something lighter and living on Route 66 at the time, he became interested in roadside culture. The result? A gory confessional. *The Speed Queen* "is the American fantasy of getting into a bigass muscle car, getting completely fucked up on drugs, having great sex, killing a bunch of people, driving west into the night as fast as you can," O'Nan said. "We've seen that story so many times that we almost buy into the idea that it might be a fun thing to do. It's just a desire, an appetite, running



upside down. ... By splicing together the themes of individual guilt, belief in a merciful God and the destructive power of an apparently malignant Nature, Stewart O’Nan has produced a fine, terse novel about the circumstantial nature of evil and the terrible fragility of man.” PATRICK MCGRATH, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 5/2/1999

## THE EXTRAORDINARY ACT OF WAITING

### The Good Wife (2005)

*The Good Wife*, O’Nan’s ninth novel, tells a compassionate, nonjudgmental tale about love, faith, blue-collar culture, prison life, and, above all, the ordinary act of waiting. Told in the present tense by an omniscient narrator, the novel delves deep inside its characters, particularly the hopeful Patty, and has been compared to Evan S. Connell’s classic 1959 novel *Mrs. Bridge*. (★★★★ July/Aug 2005)



**THE STORY:** When Patty Dickerson’s phone rings in the middle of the night, she knows there’s trouble. Her husband has been arrested and charged with robbery and murder. Patty’s ordinary life (she’s a housewife in upstate New York, pregnant with her first child) changes in an instant. She moves in with her family, starts a series of working-class jobs, raises her son, and patiently awaits her husband’s homecoming from prison. For 28 years, Patty sustains her commitment to Tommy while she maneuvers through a contemptuous, isolating community to find her own inner strength.

“Patty doesn’t wrestle with the moral questions of her husband’s guilt in the direct way a less subtle writer might have her do. ... [She] is a wonderful character, and this novel is astonishing.” MEG WOLITZER, *WASHINGTON POST*, 4/10/2005

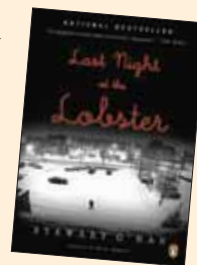
## CLOSING TIME

### Last Night at the Lobster (2007)

In his 10th novel, Stewart O’Nan proves once again why he’s the “bard of the working class” by exploring how the closing of one chain restaurant profoundly affects many lives. *Last Night at the Lobster* may be a small story, dealing with the mundane details of restaurant life, but O’Nan’s complex characters provide a service—an everyday feat that many American novels ignore—and the novel is a triumph in American realism. (★★★★ SELECTION Mar/Apr 2008)

**THE STORY:** Red Lobster manager Manny DeLeon, 35, has just found out that his restaurant is not meeting

expectations and will close its doors on December 20. This novel follows the apathetic workers as they go through the motions of serving shrimp scampi for the very last time during a blizzard that has turned away customers and with a crew that has largely jumped ship. The devoted, honorable Manny remembers his life under the fake blue marlin on the wall as he considers his broken relationship with a waitress and the pregnant girlfriend for whom he needs to find a gift. It’s life in a snowy corner of a strip near a Connecticut mall—in all its average, and surprising, glory.



“*Last Night at the Lobster* makes beautiful sense in the span of O’Nan’s writing life: It’s a Zen koan of a book—Manny’s life in all its integrity echoing out across a wintry mall in a Rust Belt American town.” SUSAN SALTER REYNOLDS, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, 11/5/2007

## ON UNTHINKABLE LOSS

### Songs for the Missing (2009)

O’Nan again showcases his storytelling abilities and his uncanny knowledge of how one event can send out ripples that affect everyone in a small Midwestern town (incidentally, the author’s old stomping grounds). Even more satisfying and heartbreaking is his understanding of what happens when the attention fades and people are left to live their lives. (★★★★ SELECTION Jan/Feb 2009)



**THE STORY:** When beautiful, popular, conscientious 18-year-old Kim Larsen disappears from Kingsville, a small Ohio town, lives are thrown into disarray. Her family and community members dedicate themselves to finding the girl; they canvass the town and plead in the media for Kim’s safe return. Lindsay, Kim’s younger sister, becomes more withdrawn as Kim, even in her absence, receives all the attention. The novel focuses on Kim’s friends (including a boyfriend and a best friend), her devastated sister and parents, and the larger community who become part of the story, which centers on the lasting effects of Kim’s disappearance. All involved discover that they must put their lives back together if they are to try to overcome their shocking loss.

“*Songs for the Missing* has a plot that is deceptively easy to summarize, but the book has a mood so subtle that only first-rate fiction can evoke it. It’s the mood of frantic boredom, of slacker intensity, of throwaway terror, of tar-pit continuity. ...

It's about the ordinariness of unthinkable loss." JOSEPH DI PRISCO,  
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, 11/16/2008

## ON GROWING OLD

### Emily, Alone (2011)

*Wish You Were Here* (2002) features the newly widowed Emily Maxwell, the family matriarch who gathers her family for one last vacation at their summer cottage by Lake Chautauqua in western New York. In this sequel, O'Nan again offers an elegant, humorous heroine. Readers will recognize in Emily their own mothers and grandmothers, if not themselves, in this insight-



ful novel on aging, dignity, and death. (★★★★ SELECTION  
May/June 2011)

**THE STORY:** The widowed 80-year-old Emily Maxwell lives a quiet life in her Pittsburgh neighborhood. Her husband's belongings remain scattered throughout their home, and her beloved dog, Rufus, grows fatter with each passing year. Emily wonders when her grown children will visit, relies on family to drive her around town, and grieves as neighbors die and their homes go up for sale. But when her aged sister-in-law, Arlene, collapses at their favorite brunch place, Emily learns that change comes to everyone, even when they are not prepared for it, and she starts to discover a newfound independence.

**"It quietly shuffles in where few authors have dared to go. And it's so humane and so finely executed that I hope it finds those sensitive readers who will appreciate it."** RON CHARLES,  
WASHINGTON POST, 3/22/2011 ■

## Interview With Stewart O'Nan

**BOOKMARKS:** Many writers seem to focus on a consistent theme or approach throughout their work (say, semiautobiographical) and mine it for the rest of their careers. One of the reasons your body of work is notable is its experimentation with different genres and narrative devices. Is this fair to say? If so, how do you think your approach to writing differs from other authors?

**O'NAN:** Once I've decided on what or who I'm writing about, I try to find the best way to bring across that emotional world to the reader. My choice of structure, form, and idiom is always in service to the characters, and because I write about very different people in very different situations, it's only natural that the books are wildly different. The flip side of this would be to develop one recognizable style and try to apply it to everything you want to write about. That tends to end in shtick or self-parody. That way lies the Elvis and Jethro Tull Christmas albums. One size does not fit all.

**BOOKMARKS:** Many of your novels seem to reflect a particular vision of life (i.e. a sense of loss, an absence of hope). Is there a particular theme or outlook in life that you see tying your works together? If so, has it evolved?

**O'NAN:** Since we're all faced with loss (ultimately we'll all lose the people we love, just as they'll lose us), across the books I see a preoccupation with what people do to get through the days, and what faith they can (or can't) rely on when things go wrong. The consequences of not having some kind of faith to keep you going are dire, and highlighted more in the early books, while the later work focuses more closely on endurance, the hidden strength of people like Patty in *The Good Wife*, or Emily [in *Wish You Were Here* and *Emily, Alone*]. And that shift may just come from age. I wrote *Snow Angels* in my 20s and *Emily, Alone* in

my late 40s. Then again, a later book like *The Night Country* is pretty dire, as is *Songs for the Missing*.

**BOOKMARKS:** What inspires your novels and how you view your characters and their worlds?

**O'NAN:** I'm drawn to people and behavior that I know is common but I still don't understand—like war, or how love turns to hate, how children turn on their parents, how supposedly good people can do terrible things. I'm always astonished, appalled and amazed at the way people treat one another.

**BOOKMARKS:** How do you gather research for your novels?

**O'NAN:** Nothing's better than a first-person source. When I knew I was going to write *Last Night at the Lobster*, I went to several Red Lobsters and spoke with managers, trying to find out what exactly a manager at Red Lobster has to do. I do location scouting for scenes—for *Songs for the Missing*, I drove around Conneaut and Kingsville, Ohio, taking hundreds of pictures, hoping to catch not just details but the mood of the place. I also try to read any books that take on the same territory, seeing what's been emphasized in the past about the experience and what's been overlooked. Likewise, I'll see how films portray characters who are in similar situations and see what's been made into a cliché. You have to do things better or differently, otherwise you're just repeating what's already been done.

**BOOKMARKS:** Our readers like to hear what their favorite authors are currently reading (or have recently read). Do you have any recommendations?

**O'NAN:** Three recent favorite novels, all very different: *Elegies for the Brokenhearted*, by Christie Hodgen; *The House on Fortune Street*, by Margot Livesey; and *The Sisters Brothers*, by Patrick DeWitt. ■