

Finding His Place In A Mysterious World

Red Hook (Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's Minotaur) by Gabriel Cohen '82 succeeds as both an engrossing whodunit and a carefully crafted work of literature. The author discusses the genesis of his first book.

I live in South Brooklyn, not far from the East River. One night a friend invited me to go for a drink in the nearby neighborhood of Red Hook. I'd never been there—all I knew was that it was home to a notorious public housing project and that it was on the waterfront. I'd soon discover that the story of the Hook features dockworkers and drug dealers, the Mafia and labor unions, a toxic canal, one of the country's greatest shipping ports, and the largest man-made object in the history of the world.

Because there's no subway stop anywhere in Red Hook, we traveled by bus. We left the comfortable brownstones of downtown Brooklyn and entered a strange, near-deserted zone of factories and weed-filled lots. As we rolled down a dark street, we saw Manhattan glimmering across the river and a few huge loading cranes hulking over the waterfront like long-necked dinosaurs. New York City is normally a cacophony of car horns, car alarms, and cell phones, but after we got off at the last stop, a block from the water, and watched the bus whine away into the night, the corner was so quiet I could actually hear night breezes whisper along the cobbled street.

Our destination was a tavern informally known as Sunny's, after the owner, and formally—tongue-in-cheek—as the Red Hook Yacht and Kayak

Club. Sunny, it turned out, was a painter, and since his art was more important to him than his bar, the place was open only one night a week. The joint was long and narrow and had the cozy interior of an old barge. The patrons were a jovial mix of local workingmen and artists attracted by the area's cheap rents. All drinks—from a bottle of Rheingold beer to a shot of fine Jameson's whisky—cost three bucks.

I returned to Sunny's on subsequent weekends, and then tentatively began exploring the surrounding neighborhood. Though the streets often looked

like a set for a movie mugging, they soon lost their menace. I realized that if someone wanted to go out robbing of an evening, he'd hardly pick such a forsaken neighborhood—there simply wouldn't be enough money on the hoof.

I came back to explore in daylight. The waterfront offered a view south across New York harbor to the low coastline of Staten Island and the graceful span of the Verrazano Bridge. Oceangoing ships glided out across the water and seagulls planed down over the shore. In the afternoons, the brick sides of old warehouses caught a warm, honeyed light which felt unique to Brooklyn. The rough beauty of the place spoke to me, and kept calling me back.

One feature of Red Hook was not so beautiful. The Gowanus Canal was a fetid worm that wound its way through the neighborhood and out into the harbor. Over a century of factory waste and raw sewage had turned it into a murky toxic cesspool locals had sarcastically nicknamed Lavender Lake.

I'd heard rumors—later confirmed by local detectives—about murder victims being dumped into the Gowanus. Once a body hit that water, it was gone forever. One day, though, as I crossed a bridge over the canal, I imagined a corpse lying on one of the banks. The image expanded. Why would someone leave a body, rather than dumping it in? And who would be sent to solve the crime? Before I knew it, I was conjuring up a novel about a homicide specialist.

Detective fiction is full of larger-than-life characters, but real people work this strange job. What would it be like to have to deal with dead bodies all the time? Would it damage your family life? Would it affect your belief in an afterlife? Would it make you sad? Why someone would do such a job struck me as a mystery in itself.

I invented a detective named Jack Leightner, a quiet, rather uptight middle-aged man with little taste for booze or sarcasm.


"Red Hook is a book that gives you a real feeling for the neighborhood. Gabriel Cohen makes no effort to pretty up the place in this outstanding first novel."

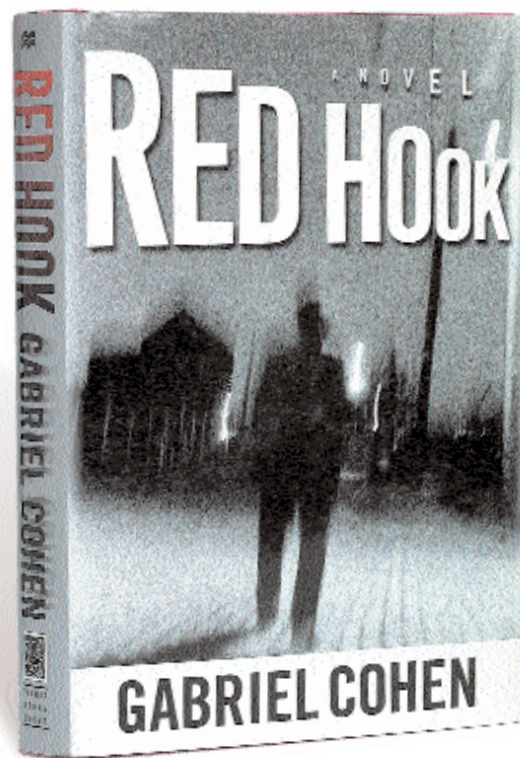
**The New York Times
Sunday Book Review**

He'd be very good at his job and committed to tracking down criminals, but he'd have his own guilty secret.

Jack's investigation would lead him into the heart of Red Hook—the last place on earth the man would want to go. When he grew up there, the place would have been a lively neighborhood, one of America's busiest ports. Today it's a near ghost town. One old-timer I met sat in front of his ramshackle house and told me that his block once boasted a barber shop, a bar, a market, and a tailor shop. Now weeds grow through the sidewalks, and every one of those businesses is just a memory. What happened? The neighborhood's savage decline was a mystery as important as any homicide.

Jack would see the neighborhood as a dismal ruin, but I wanted a character who could appreciate the stark beauty I saw there. I created a son for Jack, a young aspiring documentary filmmaker drawn to the Hook by its amazing appearance, but also in search of his own family's troubled past. My detective story turned into an exploration of the mysteries of human nature, the curses and blessings of family, and one remarkable American place.

Oh, and the largest man-made object in the world? To discover what that is, you can read *Red Hook*, or find a longer version of this essay at www.wesleyan.edu/magazine/wesmag_books.html. 



Red Hook was nominated this year for the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best First Novel.

JUST PUBLISHED

Spring 2002 Books

Our seasonal roundup of noteworthy books by Wesleyan alumni, faculty members, and parents.

STEVEN ALMOND '88

My Life in Heavy Metal

(Grove/Atlantic, 2002)

Most of the 12 stories in this entertaining fiction debut deal with the passion, humor, and angst of relationships between young men and women in the '80s and '90s. Almond is especially adept at writing about the sadness and longing experienced by his characters after the passion subsides or the relationships end. Among the stand-outs in this likable collection are: "Geek

Player, Love Slayer," the tale of a 33-year-old female reporter who lusts after a younger computer repairman but discovers affection from a friendly coworker; "Among the Ik," about an aging college professor who remembers the tragic death of one of his former students as he strives to accept his wife's recent passing; and "How to Love a Republican," an amusing account of a romance between a Democrat and a Republican who become involved during the 2000 presidential election and find it hard to sustain their affair because of political differences.—David Low '76

BONNIE FRIEDMAN '79

The Thief of Happiness

(Beacon Press, 2002)

In this intense, highly detailed memoir, Friedman recounts the highs and lows of seven exhausting years of therapy with the enigmatic Dr. Harriet

Sing. The author enters therapy to deal with writer's block, which she quickly conquers, but she soon finds herself completely infatuated with Dr. Sing, who appears to have "unique access to mystical information." As she continues her therapy sessions, Friedman begins to alienate her husband, family, and friends, and the effectiveness of the treatment becomes ambiguous. The author vividly portrays her complex relationship with Dr. Sing, the painful emotions she uncovers during sessions, and the danger of relinquishing autonomy to her therapist. Some of the most powerful portions of the book are devoted to memories of her depressed mother and her overbearing sister and friends, and how these relationships affected her sense of self-worth. Finally Friedman must decide to end treatment without her therapist's blessing in order to regain confidence in her own abilities. —DL

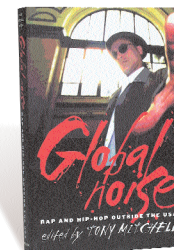
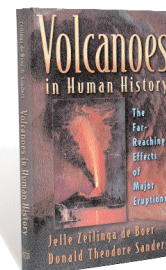
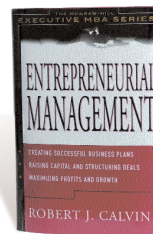
Nonfiction:

Ron Ashkenas '72, Dave Ulrich, Todd Jick '71, and Steve Kerr, **The Boundaryless Organization** (Jossey-Bass, 2002)

Andy Behrman '84, **Electroboy: A Memoir of Mania** (Random House, 2002)

Robert J. Calvin '56, **Sales Management** (McGraw-Hill Professional Publishing, 2001) and **Entrepreneurial Management** (McGraw-Hill Professional Publishing, 2002)

Michele N-K Collison '83, **It's All Good Hair** (HarperCollins, 2002)



Anne-Marie Concepcion P'05, **Professional Web Site Design from Start to Finish** (F&W Publications, 2002)

Rahul K. Dhanda '95, **Guiding Icarus: Merging Bioethics with Corporate Interests** (John Wiley and Sons, 2002)

Pagan Kennedy '84, **Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Adventure in the Nineteenth-Century Congo** (Viking Press, 2002)

Peter G. Meyer '80, editor, **Brushes with History: Writing on Art from The Nation, 1865–2001** (Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001)

John Stauffer '91, **The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race** (Harvard University Press, 2002)

Mark Steinmetz '82 (photographs) and Janet Lembke (text), **Tuscan Trees** (The Jargon Society, 2001)

Gennifer Weisenfeld '87, **Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde 1905–1931** (University of California Press, 2002)

Adam Zagoria '91 and Teresa Weatherspoon, **She's Got Handle: The Story of Nicole Louden's Triumph Through Inner-City Basketball** (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2001)

Jelle Zeilinga de Boer, Harold T. Stearns Professor of Earth Science; and Donald Sanders '52, **Volcanoes in Human History: The Far Reaching Effects of Major Eruptions** (Princeton University Press, 2002)

Fiction and Poetry:

F.D. Reeve, Professor of Letters, **The Urban Stampede and Other Poems** (Michigan State University Press, 2002)

Brian Ascalon Roley '89, **American Son** (W.W. Norton, 2001)

Simone Zelitch '84, **Moses in Sinai** (Black Heron Press, 2001)

Also of Note:

Steven Greenhouse '73 and Dylan McClain '88 are two of the more than 140 contributors to **Portraits 9/11/01: The Collected Portraits of Grief from The New York Times** (Times Books, 2002). Profits from the book will go to various charities. For Dylan McClain's thoughts on writing the portraits, please see www.wesleyan.edu/magazine/wesmag_books.html.

From Wesleyan University Press:

Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA, edited by Tony Mitchell

This anthology contains 13 scholarly essays which explore the hip-hop scenes of Europe, Canada, Japan, and Australia within their social, cultural, and ethnic contexts. The book shows how international hip-hop scenes developed by first adopting and then adapting U.S. models so that an increasing hybrid of local linguistic and musical features was established.

For additional book reviews and listings, please see www.wesleyan.edu/magazine/wesmag_books.html.

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