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The Last Page

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a dead character

By Bill Roorbach

I've got a terrorist in my first novel, *The Smallest Color*, which went on sale just a couple of weeks after the World Trade Center towers came down and the Pentagon got hit. This character, Hodge Henry, is the older brother of my protagonist, Coop. Hodge Henry did his bad deeds in the late 1960s and wouldn't have been called a terrorist then, by most people, or by the media, but probably called a "militant." And what's peculiar about Hodge Henry is that the gesture he and many a real bad guy in those days was making got its start in the anti-war movement. His logic (and that of his real counterparts, the Weathermen, the Yippies and many others) was something along the lines of fighting fire with fire, and his methods (and theirs) were just as wrong as what they were protesting, which was primarily that little war in Vietnam, in which some 1.65 million people died, some 50 thousand of them American fellows the age of Hodge Henry, who in the novel dies in his own horrible way, at home in America, at the age of 22. The book is about Coop Henry's ongoing struggles with that death, and with the various traumas of the era, ongoing unto middle age.

These anti-war warriors, these militant pacifists, these walking oxymorons, these moronic sages, they were very charming, some of them, and hijacked various corners of (let's call it) the hippie movement with their angry logic and anti-establishment rhetoric, bringing many a peace-loving kid and squishy thinker along with them on what were essentially pathological and not just political missions.

Because of that charm, I had a hell of a time writing my novel. My character, Hodge, kept coming off as a likeable guy, a kindly big brother to my protagonist, merely a man with a political conscience. It wasn't till I came to draft 1,000,006 that I figured the book's problem—my man Hodge was very bad, a criminal, a killer, and I had to make him very bad, inside and out, and not be fooled by his charm, and in the end not let my protagonist, good old Coop Henry, be fooled

either. Because that's how evil wins—it dresses up as good, and since it is willing to destroy, as good is not, it has an advantage from the start.

On September 11, 2001, I was supposed to start class at Colby, where I was teaching a semester as a visiting professor. I drove over there that morning (it's about an hour to Waterville from where I live in Maine) listening to the radio in a kind of rolling shock—of course, the death, the destruction, the awful whiff of fundamentalism, the probable loss of friends (later confirmed) was the core of the shock. But the waves from the attacks rippled out and caught the still-echoing waves of earlier shocks from my college years, those Vietnam years, all the gentle stuff certain hippie-patriots like me believed, all the stuff we marched for, while all the while a squawking welter of more violent philosophies took advantage of the confusion in our heads and hearts, of the chaos in our cities, and of our fear.

At Colby I didn't teach class—I got in there and looked at those kids and tried to say something smart but just started weeping, and the kids that could, they cried, too, all for their own reasons. But for me it was a bad dream recurring, some idiot's idea that violence was the way, and the sure bet that violence would be seen as the solution, the spoiled history of humankind returning yet again. What chance did these kids have, even with

all their privilege and brains? What was the point of making fiction, or teaching it?

Coop Henry saves the day in the novel, but only the day. He couldn't save the world. He's only fictional, for one reason. But human nature, it turns out, the real thing, abhors peace. And human belief in all its various forms, all its various blind stabs at the truth, cannot live and let live, at least not in the hands of the stupid, and stupid, it appears, is who's in charge, world-wide. Meanwhile, hope returns, that other human thing. Oh, peace, love. Write about that, kids. This is fiction class, after all.

Bill Roorbach, a 2002 NEA fellow, is the author of three new books: Big Bend, The Smallest Color and Into the Woods. He lives in western Maine.

