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Living in a Different World

By [JOHN DAVIS](#)
 AVALANCHE-JOURNAL

Don Quixote stands watch over the computer.

For author and Texas Tech English professor Stephen Graham Jones, the character is his hero because he was able to live in a different world while still occupying the same planet with everyone else.

In a way, the lair on the third-floor English building becomes another world for Jones as he weaves together his novels. This is where he completed his third novel, "The Bird Is Gone: A Manifesto," which hit bookstores Wednesday.

The science fiction novel is about an ecological bill that tries to save the Great Plains region of the United States.



Robin O'Shaughnessy / A-J Photo Texas Tech english professor Stephen Jones leaves his office Wednesday, Sept. 3, 2003, to teach his evening class. Jones recently had his own book published "All The Beautiful Sinners."



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Because of a loophole in the law and because American Indians were regarded as flora and fauna of the plains in the 1800s, the entire region becomes a giant American Indian reservation.

He said it was the most difficult of his three novels to write.

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"It just melted my brain trying to keep things straight," he said. "I don't know if I'll ever write another science fiction again. It's just so complex."

Jones says he has tried to break away from traditional story lines about American Indians. Instead, they are an element and a modern-day example.

"With Indian writers, there are oftentimes issues of legitimacy," he said. "Is the author really an Indian? So, they take a very Indian photograph, and they choose material that is very exotic to the average American. That's why a lot of the stories happen on the reservation. They infuse their work with a lot of oral tradition stuff. Mythic properties. It seems like it's selling the public the Indian they want. You know ... the noble savage."

"For the Native American novel to come of age, it has to lampoon itself. And that's what I tried to do with 'The Fast Red Road — A Plainsong.' "

Jones isn't the professor type. He's a jeans-and-T-shirt kind of guy rather than a tweed-and-pipe type, more someone you'd expect to find in a coffee shop. A sharp wit shines through as he speaks, along with the watchful eyes of a writer.

Old paperbacks are stacked in neat pyramids in his office and jammed wherever they'll fit on bookcases. Some of them are standard classics, many of them science fiction. A picture of an old Ford truck hangs on the wall, magnetized members of the band KISS cling to a filing cabinet and the sounds of Rob Zombie and Steely Dan fill the room.

The noise helps, Jones says. Silence is too distracting. With plenty of energy drinks or packages of candy at hand, he gets to work.

"I used to go at it for, like, 10 or 12 hours at a time," he said. "Now that I'm married and have kids, I have to fit it in wherever I can. You know, 20 minutes here, 10 minutes there."

Jones said he's always been interested in writing.

"All my writing in high school was long apology letters to girlfriends," he said.

Then, while waiting in the emergency room at University Medical Center, Jones, then 20, said, he started writing a short story. Though never published, he showed it to some professors at Tech, who encouraged him to take more writing classes.

He started his first novel at 25, "The Fast Red Road — A Plainsong." This was his dissertation at Florida State University and was published three years later.

A member of the Blackfeet Nation, the 31-year-old grew up on the family ranch near Midland and moved around West Texas. If he wasn't out shooting hoops on the driveway, Jones said, he was reading.

Jones' mother, Rebecca Dobbs, said she remembers her son's voracious appetite for reading.

"Ever since he was able to walk around, when he came to you, he would come to you with a whole armful of books," she said.

"He didn't want one book. He wanted all books. And he started memorizing the parts and the page numbers, so if you skipped over anything, he'd say, 'What about this part?' It was hard if you were tired."

She cried Wednesday after receiving her copy of Jones's new book for her birthday — the book was dedicated to her.

"This child has given me everything," she said. "He was this wise little spirit who came into my life. I always felt like I was learning from him. Now he has a family and a fabulous wife."

When close friend Joe Ferrer first met Jones, he was surprised to find how intelligent Jones was.

"We both worked at the main Tech Library," Ferrer said. "We were doing some processing. He just casually mentioned that he got his Ph.D. at Florida State University, and I was like, 'Whoa, this guy is just here coasting.' He's probably one of the smartest guys I know."

"I realized he was on a genius level. He'd read computer books like people read a novel, and he'd retain what he'd read."

Ferrer said that he has enjoyed watching Jones' writing evolve and liked his second book, "All the Beautiful Sinners," a serial murder thriller that Jones published in April.

"His writing has improved with his second book," Ferrer said. "It was a darker story, but it was well written. The characters were developed a lot better."

authenticity by melding his characters from conglomerations of real people and writing in such a way as to draw a scene in the readers' minds.

"Just give me a keyboard and I'll take off," he said.

Next on the list for Jones is to teach his senior creative writing students how to write a novel. And he's polishing "Seven Spanish Angels," his next novel due out in June.

"I guess I'm through with the first draft of it," Jones said. "I think I was lucky, I guess. I lucked out with a good ending. Also, I've had some people read the earlier draft say it's more accessible, so hopefully I'm going out in that direction. I'm trying anyway."

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Stephen Graham Jones



- Grew up in Greenwood, near Midland, and has three brothers, three sisters and a stepbrother.
- First published in October 2000 with "The Fast Red Road — A Plainsong," which won the Independent Publishers Award for Multicultural Fiction.
- His second book, "All the Beautiful Sinners," came out this year and was lauded by Mike Shea the in August edition of Texas Monthly.
- Will give a reading and sign his new book, "The Bird Is

