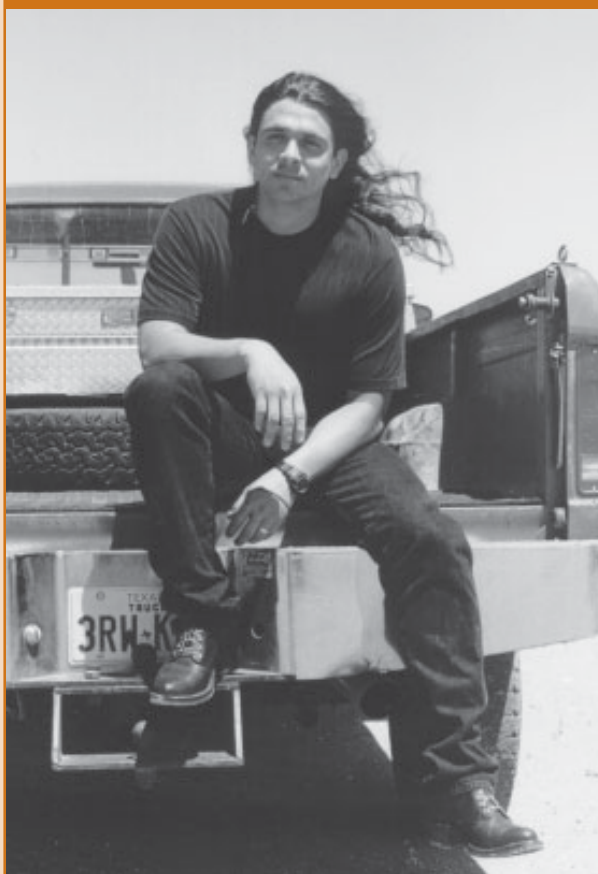


Free! Take One!



Stephen Jones: Professor and West Texas Author



Dr. Stephen Graham Jones reflects on writing, life, and photographers from the bumper of his '79 pickup.

(Photos courtesy of J. Marcus Weekley)

I knew it would be a trip to interview Stephen Jones when I first met him.

I had been invited to some small-town Texas joint to judge an essay contest by a friend from Tech, and Jones was part of our three-person judging committee. On the way up and the way back, we three talked about everything from movies to photography to who-knows-what, but I could tell Jones was an approachable guy. So when I heard that he was having two book readings and signings to promote his recently released novel, *All the Beautiful Sinners*, I couldn't pass up an opportunity to talk with the guy, who's married, has two kids, lives outside of Lubbock, and teaches English at Texas Tech.

Saturday we had met up at Wendy's on 4th and Frankford, then decided to go scout out various locations for a cool place to take a picture or two to go along with the interview; we ended up under a dying tree, Jones sitting on the bumper of his cadmium red '79 pickup (complete with 8-track player and *Grease* soundtrack). Next, we ventured to a run-down warehouse north of town, on his suggestion, and instead of being able to get in, we found a ramshackle gutted house and an accompanying garage nearby, after traipsing through a little underbrush. Once we got there, Jones shared about how he loved these kinds of abandoned places because he played in them when he was a kid. Then he pointed out all the fascinating stuff you can find around them – like warped pieces of railroad, broken mirrors, and chunks of wood. I shot some photos before we moseyed back to Wendy's to sit down and have a chat about Jones's novel, *All*

the Beautiful Sinners, which publisher Rugged Land released April 16.

I'm always interested in how people start writing, so while we waited in line, I asked him how he began writing fiction.

"In 1990, my uncle had gotten burned, and I was sitting in the waiting room for about three days and I had a spiral notebook with me, [and wrote my first story] and I went home and typed it up," he said. "I showed it to Dana Fontenot in Engineering [at Texas Tech], and she liked it and said, 'Do more like this.'"

So I asked him about school, what he was doing at Tech in the first place.

"I was a philosophy major then; I was just taking English classes to fulfill the requirements," he said. I kind of laughed and he continued, "What could be easier than reading a book and writing a paper on it."

Yeah, not for some people; I still despise writing essays. We moved ahead in line, and I asked him about the initial short story, what it was about.

"The first line went 'He trudged through the never-ending whiteness that is despair,'" and he laughed, "I know, kind of grand." He went on to explain that it was about a guy and a girl in a car-wreck; the guy's narrating the story, and we're in his unconscious.

After we'd gotten our fries (they were mine; he proudly half-boasted that he hasn't eaten French fries in a year: "They cause cancer.") and sodas, we sat down at a corner table to continue our

*continues on page 4
See Stephen Jones*

Stephen Jones, West Texas Author, Publishes Second Novel

continued from page 1

conversation. He shared with me about how he met his wife at Tech, how he graduated with a double major in philosophy and English in 1994, then moved on to the University of North Texas for the Ph.D. program in English.

After one of the professors there, Bill Cobb, moved, Jones left school, too, with a master's degree in English. He then relocated to Florida State, where he completed his doctoral degree in 1998. He and his wife actually moved back to the Lubbock area in 1997, but he didn't officially get his degree until 1998.

After taking a few sips of my root beer, I asked him how he first got published.

"I didn't get published until '95 or '96. It was weird because I was outside looking at a solar eclipse, and my wife said my grandma was on the phone saying my mom had been in a head-on collision, and then right as I hung up the phone, the Black Warrior Review [a literary magazine] called and [said they'd accepted my story and] they even paid me \$165, or maybe \$175."

He said the tale, "Paleogenesis, c.a. 1970," riffed off of the Adam and Eve story, and he always knew he wanted to be the best at what he did.

"I wanted to be in Best American Short Stories, which we'd read in Jill Patterson's class [at Tech]. I thought I wanted to be one of the best."

And after munching fries dipped in ranch dressing, I asked him what that meant for him, what his goal as a writer is.

"My goal, I guess, is to be J.K. Rawlings [Harry Potter author], to have the audience there waiting, instead of having to make an audience. It could also

just come back down to getting back at all those people that told me, 'You can't do it.'" And he went on, "[I love basketball and] I'll never be as good as Kobe Bryant or Rasheed Wallace, and I want to be good



Jones will be reading and signing his second novel on Thursday at 7:30 in room 001 of the English Building and on Saturday at 1pm at Barnes and Noble.

at something. I just can't imagine not wanting to be the best."

After returning to West Texas in 1997, Jones worked moving refrigerators until he hurt his back irreparably, so he

went to work at the Texas Tech Library as a book cataloguer until he was hired as a visiting professor in 2000, which coincided with the publication of his first novel, *The Fast Red Road*—the Plain-song, that year. Jones won the Independent Publication's Multicultural Award for Fiction in 2001 for *The Fast Red Road*.

And to boot, not only did Jones get one of his favorite authors, Gerald Vizenor, to write a blurb for the book for him, but also Jones said one of the reviewers writing about the book actually understood what he was trying to do through the novel. "A guy at Pop Matters wrote about it; he read it as I wrote it, and I was so happy that somebody got the read out of it that I tried to write into it."

But *The Fast Red Road*, published by Fiction Collective 2 (they go by FC2), wasn't the only thing Jones had written prior to the first book's publication: "I think I wrote two horror novels while I was at the library, a big one called *Demon Theory: an Exploitation*, and a skinny one, called *Bloodlines*. *Demon Theory* is my absolute favorite thing I've written and I can't convince anybody to publish it. It's very consciously, I hate to say postmodern, but it plays all these games with the reader. It's got three versions of the same story."

Getting a drink of root beer, I asked him about the latest novel of his to come out, *All the Beautiful Sinners*.

He said it's about this detective named Jim Doe, living in Nazareth, TX, who stumbles onto a serial killer and starts chasing him, because the killer's done something to impact Doe's life. "Originally, it was 703 pages long, but luckily the editor is a smart guy and now it's 486 pages," Jones said.

To promote his newest book, Jones is giving a reading and book signing both Thursday and Saturday. He had this to say about reading his fiction to an audience, and about why they should come.

"Readings are weird. They give you a taste of the fiction to see if you want to invest 25 bucks in the book, plus the other reason is you [the author] get involved with the audience. But the reason I became a writer instead of a performer is to have a buffer between me and the audience, but a reading erases the buffer because you're right there five feet from your audience. You write because you don't want to be involved with people, or at least that's the reason I do it."

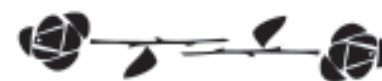
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