

It's a Job, Not a Frame of Mind: Andre Dubus III on Fatherhood, Karma and Creativity (extended interview)

Andre Dubus III is the author of *The Garden of Last Days* and *House of Sand and Fog* (an Oprah Book Club pick, a finalist for the National Book Award, and a major Hollywood film). His latest book, *Townie*, totally blew my mind. It in, he describes growing up in a rough Massachusetts neighborhood with his three siblings, his hard-working, loving, but uneducated single mom, and his father, the celebrated fiction writer, Andre Dubus II (one of my favorite writers of all time) living across the river. Dubus and his siblings only saw their father once a week, and the rest of the time, tried to figure out how to survive with their stomachs growling and in a world where rage and revenge ruled. Ultimately, after a childhood spent in fear, the young Dubus became an impressive street fighter, then a boxer, always on the lookout for someone to defend. What touched me so deeply about the book was the way Dubus understands violence, as the "membrane....." And even so, is able to, finally, let go of that habit of body and mind and find himself in losing himself in his writing. His relationship with his father remained friendly but superficial until he, Dubus Senior, was in a terrible accident where he stopped his car to tend to some folks who had been in a crash, only to be run into by an oncoming car. He lost one leg as a result, and was in chronic pain for the rest of his life. His son, Andre Dubus III stepped right in and did everything he could to help his dad heal. Ultimately, Dubus Senior swore to his son that as a result of his accident, his Catholic devotion deepened to such a degree that he would not have changed a thing. This is a family of deep dudes.

BS: In *Townie*, you write about a series of events where you were realizing that your dad had no idea what your life had been like. And then, "We were headed to a place where only hurt feelings could surface, both of us misunderstood, a universal human plight, it seemed. I changed the subject. But I told myself that he and I would have to talk openly about this one day. And what *was* this, anyway?"

Many of us find ourselves here with our parents, mad about what they didn't do. And our culture tends to encourage us to just "get it out there." And you chose not to do that. So could you talk a little bit about that choice, and what you meant when you said, 'what *was* this, anyway?'

AD: Yea. I'll start with that part. The whole subject for me, of someone's painful childhood is just fraught with difficulty, because I think most people's childhood is somewhat painful. I do know of people who say they've had a happy childhood, but they're very rare. I think it's tough to go from birth to 18, 20 years old, and there are all sorts of forces pushing and pulling against us. And one of the things I find troubling about American culture—there are so many things I find troubling about American culture, and frankly have my whole life—one of them is this overly psychological approach to pain. Nothing against my psychologist brothers and sisters. I've gone to a few and they've helped me, but I do think in this country we have very little tolerance for pain, loss, ambiguity, emotional confusion, a lack of clarity. We're such little worker bees with goals. I actually don't like the word happiness (and I am actually going to get to your question, believe it or not!). It bothers me. I like the word joy. I think the word joy's got darkness in it. I think it's joy when a woman gives birth after 30 hours of agonizing labor. It's joy when you're in that shower after a 12 mile run in the rain. It's joy when you've written the last line of a novel you've been working on for five years. So what I'm getting at is that I've always been really hesitant to try to fix something emotionally fraught too soon, too readily, with something like a conversation with my father. I've never trusted that anything would change. It largely felt futile to try.

I think it's kind of a talk-show approach, that when we have a problem, we must fix it. And while that's all good and some people are suffering to a horribly acute degree and you need all sorts of care like that. I think for most of us, we're neurotic in this country because we expect we're supposed to be happy. I don't think we're supposed to be happy. I think we're supposed to be alive. And part of being alive is all the notes of the symphony get hit, and there are some dark ones. And there are some light ones. So behind that question, what was this anyway, there's a distrust of ever really knowing what's going on inside me emotionally, and also a distrust of is there anything to do about it other than paint it, or try to capture it with art? There's this great line from Flannery O'Connor: The writer's job is to make actual the mystery of our position on earth. With the old man, though....I'm 52 and the years I covered in *Townie* are a long time ago. And that moment where I could see once again, that he was really ignorant about the lives we led on the other side of that river, and you know

what? I felt compelled, not just as his son, but I really felt compelled to tell the guy who spent his life trying to write very truly about human beings, that he is really too smart and sensitive to push this aside. He really needs to know more. So why didn't that conversation happen? Well, I had some paragraphs about how when any of us went to the old man to say we need a belt, or a pair of shoes or this or that, and he would really explode, he would just lose it, yell, and worse than that, he would go into rages using his Marine Corp voice, so we learned very quickly, you don't ask him for anything. But he's dead. And I love him, and I miss him. So there's only so much shadow of his I'm going to show before I start to feel like a creep and like a cry-baby, frankly.

BS: If you just put the details of your family on paper, it would not look good. The things your siblings went through. You were all suffering.

AD: Right. It was not a happy house.

BS: Right, and yet, and this is the part that is just so curious to me, in the end of the book, you're all together, you're all at your dad's house, your mom and her husband are there, too. And so my question is, how could a family that went through so much and actually really did make a lot of bad choices, as kids growing up....

AD: And as young parents, growing up....

BS: We'll get to that, too. So how did you end up so connected as a family?

AD: That's such a great question. And I still don't know the answer but I can wrestle with it a bit with you. Right now I'm sitting in my house that my brother designed, and he and I and a buddy built. I'm looking out at the woods we live in, and it's Dubus central. We have all our holidays and we get a big 15 foot tree that I put in my big 15 foot ceiling living room with the big fireplace and everybody will be here. My wife's 90 year old mother lives downstairs in her own apartment, there are three, sometimes four generations in this house. And we all come over here for a lot of Sunday dinners, every holiday...what I'm getting at is that we're still that close. We take vacations together. Part of me thinks that maybe, and this is just an insight I'm having right now with you, frankly, that maybe one reason why we're all so close is like survivor glue. People who were marooned on a boat for 17 days on an open sea with no food and sharks circling. I think there's a bond from that kind of shared suffering, and I also think that no matter what my parents were good or not so good at in their parenting of us 4 kids, I think somewhere along the way, we must have felt loved on some level for all of us to have turned out pretty ok.

BS: And ok, together. A lot of times in those boats, it does not go well.

AD: Right, some people get thrown off those friggin boats.

BS: And eaten!

AD: Yea....

BS: Right. I wonder about all this stuff, about parents and attachment, how to get this thing off the ground, particularly when you haven't gotten so much of it yourself. It really begs the question, what is good enough parenting? It's such a mystery. All of you went through so much suffering and turned out ok!

AD: I won't say I felt treasured. I keep seeing this image of my mom, lying on the floor, using an old pillow from our wicker couch, in her work clothes, watching whatever was on, falling asleep really early, the house filthy, us running wild, no rules, and it felt like there were five kids in that house and she was the older sister. So when I think of those years I think of her as, frankly, overwhelmed and depressed. But she never hit us, she never called us names. She never succumbed to alcoholism or drug addiction, and she never drove away. And I feel like, something made her stay. I guess it was us.

I wrestle with all of this as a father. I have three teenagers now. I will say that four Dubus kids you read about, we all make

our mistakes, but we're all really conscientious, work at it, parents. Not saying we don't fuck up, but we work at it.

BS: What do you have to work at?

AD: I can be a bit overprotective. I still have a bat beside the bed, even though we live in the woods right next door to this cute little town where the most dangerous thing to happen is you might trip over an empty Starbucks cup. I think that's where Freud is misunderstood. He proposed that an adult's childhood may actually have some bearing on his or her adulthood. But he was actually less interested in what happened to that adult as a child; he was much more interested in what that adult thought about what happened. I think that's really what the memoir is all about, entering that incredibly subjective lens. The word remember means to put back together again.

BS: You've heard the word karma, I'm sure. As the Buddha taught it, karma is just the natural force of anything to propagate itself. You write about this a lot in your book.

AD: Really?

BS: Yes, it's really interesting. For instance, you call it, "the light that shot into your brain, how it made you want to do the same to another." You're talking about the karma of the fight. I know you stopped fighting and starting writing, but I am curious about how you transformed those karmic forces into a creative life.

AD: I think you're right, and it has to do with my having gone to the belly of the beast with the violence. It was karmic. I knew innately that the more violence I did the more I drew to me, and the violence got more and more dangerous. You just nailed for me what it is that I think I try to bring to my fatherhood experience more than anything else, and that is this: I try to respond to them and not react to them. That means that I've yelled at them very rarely, I think once. The truth is, for me, anyway, writing got me out of the ego, this whole practice of sitting with a pencil in my hand, staring at a page, and trying to become another human being really put me in a place of empathy. Which is not to say I go through the world like that—I can be as shut down as anybody else—but it has definitely affected my view of the world. I think as a kid I looked at people as good guys and bad guys: bullies were bad, and victims were good. It was the really rigorous discipline of writing fiction that got me into looking at people in a more complex way.

BS: Including yourself?

AD: Starting with myself. I think that's the main thing I'm bringing to my kids. It's a daily choice for me, to respond instead of react.

BS: In the book you write, "I imagine that helping Pop get his strength back gave the kind of sustained creative satisfaction a gardener must feel, or a coach, or a father." I would like to talk about the creative life of parenting, but also, the way you gave your father the benefit of the doubt. In saying that, you're suggesting that your father experienced his life as a father as a sustained creative endeavor. What do you think?

AD: I think being a father at that time, when I wrote the line, hurt, because I actually believe I had that experience more than he did. He drove away from it and never got to have it. I think he got those kinds of experiences in his beautiful writing and his teaching. He gave the best part of himself to others. He many times said that he relaxed with his family. Well, being a father is a job, being a husband is a job, it's not a state of being. But I think my old man, in his defense, was from a generation where it was a title, it wasn't a job. You're supposed to make the money and hand it over to Mrs., but that was about it. By the way I take it so fucking seriously. If the universe somehow said, ok, Andre, you're either gonna be a father or a writer, I wouldn't even pause, I wouldn't even think about it. I would be a father. So one of the things I bring to my experience as a dad, I don't want the kids to ever think the writing comes before they do. They never heard, "Be quiet, Daddy's writing." E-ver. When they were little kids, we lived in this little 900 square foot house, I wrote in my car. For years. Winter, spring, summer, fall. I wasn't going to do that to them.

BS: Your mom didn't have the resources that you have, but it seems like she taught you that kind of generosity. From what I

read, that was the kind of heart she had.

AD: Yeah, she tried, it really showed itself most on holidays where she tried to make it magic and she had nothing to work with. Nothing. It's shocking.

BS: You talk a lot about meaning, and about you got really into looking at cultural oppression as a way of understanding what is going on. I could really relate to that. For a long time I pushed the creative impulse away, thinking, what good is this?

AD: I did the same thing for a while.

BS: I am so inspired by the way you went through those questions and really came out on the other end saying, you know what? Disappearing into the life of another through writing is good enough. It's useful.

AD: Yes, and there's only so much you want to drag the reader through, but I really think a life without books and music and dance and theater...is it worth living? You can still have some sweet moments, like trees and apples, but what's life without art? And especially without stories. It never ceases to move me, how we need stories, on a soul-level, the way we need food and water and shelter and love.

BS: And you felt empowered to offer that before anyone said, we like your work and we want to publish it.

AD: Yes, this whole karma thing is fascinating to me. When I made the decision to box, which was ironically one way I was trying to control my violence, as I started to try to shift where I was, that probably created the space in which I sat down, brewed some tea, and wrote my first scene. Something made me sit down. And when I was done I was in a heightened state of awareness. I could see with great clarity, my dirty little rented kitchen in a way I hadn't seen it before. I had no intention of being a writer, it was just the act itself that got me, this descent into the dream world. I was more myself. And I was more awake. And it was drug-free, and I loved that.

BS: One of my favorite short stories ever, and definitely my favorite of your dad's was A Father's Story.

AD: That's also one of mine. It ends with the narrator having a conversation with God. Who the hell can pull that off?

BS: The love the narrator has for his daughter is so mind-blowingly present and tender. Forgive me if this is too personal, but reading that did you ever feel a hope, like, wow, my dad must have felt that for me?

AD: Yeah, you're right on. I think when I read the degree of love that Ripley had for his daughter I was surprised at how much love was coming out of this father for a child. I think 99% of us wake up trying to have the best day we know how to have. That's not the same as the best day we can have. And that's where growth comes in. We can all do better. Start our days with the highest hopes and end our day in a jail cell with blood underneath our fingernails. That sure wasn't the plan. I think my father did the best he knew how to do. It was not the best he could have done. There could have been phone calls. There could have been more interest shown. The truth is his capacity to show fatherly love surprised me in his work, and he got better as he got older, and especially after he became a crippled man. Talk about the Buddhist letting go thing, this guy had to sit still and listen. He's in a wheel chair. And he has to actually look at whoever is in the room and ask them for help. He was humbled literally, which then humbled him spiritually. He really did tell me he would still stop on that highway knowing everything he was going to lose.

I love this epigraph from Graham Greene's *The End Of The Affair*. "Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence."