

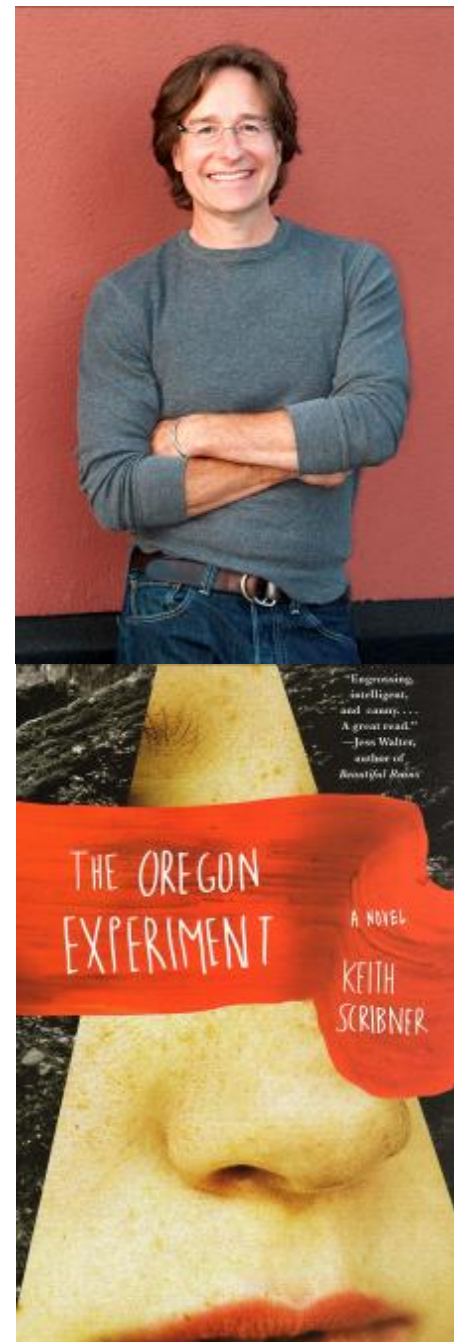
Interview: Novelist Keith Scribner Personalizes the Politics of Secessionism in *The Oregon Experiment*

Keith Scribner's most recent novel, *The Oregon Experiment*,¹ personalizes the politics of secessionism. Scanlon and Naomi Pratt are Easterners who have recently moved to small-town Oregon, where he has taken a job as a professor specializing in domestic radical and mass movements; she is a professional "nose" (perfume designer) who has lost her sense of smell. Their relocation is an act of reinvention, he finding abundant local research material and her nose reawakened by new western scents. However, reinvention soon threatens their marriage when the lives of Scanlon's research subjects—Clay, an anarchist who loathes him but is drawn to his wife, and Sequoia, a sensuous secessionist who attracts the professor—become intertwined with theirs. Set against the background of local protests against state and federal authorities that are redolent of dynamics in the contemporary State of Jefferson secessionist movement, *The Oregon Experiment*, as enthusiastically reviewed in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "makes the potential cultural and economic independence of Cascadia worth pondering rather than snickering at..." In an interview with the editor of this issue of *HJSR*, Scribner, who is a professor of English and Creative Writing at Oregon State University, elaborates on how the State of Jefferson influenced *The Oregon Experiment*.¹

The title of your novel refers to a fictionalized secessionist movement. To what degree is *The Oregon Experiment* informed by the State of Jefferson secessionist movement?

The State of Jefferson was the primary movement I researched for the novel, although I studied several others

¹*The Oregon Experiment* was published in hardback in 2011 by Knopf and reissued in paperback in 2012 by Vintage.



too. My Oregon Experiment secessionists take inspiration from State of Jefferson (which I rename State of Liberty in the novel); one of the characters was formerly involved with State of Liberty but became disillusioned during the so-called Klamath Water Wars. The Oregon Experiment secessionists share with the State of Jefferson a strong regional identity, a distrust of power centers in state capitols and Washington, DC, a sense of being ignored and peripheral, an independent spirit that they can go it alone and do a much better job of managing their lives, economy, and resources, an idealized vision of what their new state would look like, the desire for reinvention, and so on. In short, most of what motivates the State of Jefferson. A difference is that my fictional secessionists are characterized more as lefties compared with at least the historical ideology driving the State of Jefferson.

How did you become interested in the State of Jefferson secessionist movement? What aspects do you find compelling?

Much of the identity and meaning for the State of Jefferson seems to arise out of the images and memory/mythology of the 1941 secession. I'm interested in how that mythology informs who they are now, both as individuals and as a movement. We all search for narratives that explain to us who we are, that define us, and we find them in family history, religion, culture, society, nation, region, profession, and so on. I'm fascinated by how an individual's consciousness could be informed by, say, the 1941 secession—how that narrative is woven into his very identity. More broadly, I'm fascinated by how all Americans—shaped to some degree by the myths of the American dream—identify with a secessionist movement like the State of Jefferson. The go-it-alone frontier spirit, the promise of westward expansion, and the promise of reinvention of the self are all part of the narrative we tell ourselves about who we are. The State of Jefferson confirms a spirit we value in ourselves. (Oddly enough, the State of Jefferson and *The Great Gatsby* have a lot in common.) There's much more I could say here, but I'll just mention finally that we as a nation we were born of a secessionist movement and our greatest national crisis, the Civil War, was of course precipitated by a secessionist movement. The impulse and the notion run deep.

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***The Oregon Experiment* has been translated into French and has sold well in France. What aspects of the novel do you help explain the popularity of the novel among the French?**

I think the French, too, find that the State of Jefferson appeals to their understanding of the American narrative. There's also an interest generally in France about the American West. And the French are no strangers to major political demonstrations. In the novel Scanlon rejoices that

“[e]very few years, over crop subsidies or tariffs, all the farmers in France drove tractors to Paris and parked the length of the Champs-Élysées, holding the street hostage until they got what they wanted.” I believe the sensuality of the novel is also appealing to them. Naomi is a professional “nose,” a genius nose, who has completely lost her sense of smell years before the novel begins. In the opening pages, as she and Scanlon arrive in Oregon for the first time, the rich and wonderful smells of the place reawaken her olfactory powers.

The political secessionist movement of your novel takes place in parallel with a personal-level secession of sorts, namely that of the unraveling of the relationship between protagonist, Scanlon, and his wife, Naomi. Could you expand on this parallelism? What is the relationship between the political and the personal?

The personal and political serve as metaphors for each other in the novel. All of the characters are seceding from someplace, someone, or something. Sequoia has cut ties with her family, especially her father, which surely informs her views of the government as patriarchy. Scanlon and Naomi have left the East and each in their own way try to “go native” in the Pacific Northwest. The strain of being in a new place, with a new job and a new baby creates a rift between them; they each idealize a better life separate from the other. And in terms of this connection I keep coming back to identity and reinvention of the self. Most people around the world don’t consider for themselves this promise implicit in being American that you can uproot and recreate yourself with ease.

Scanlon is a New Yorker who arrives in Douglas, a fictionalized small university town in Oregon, to feed his academic interests in anarchy and secession, all the while with the intent to return East. Do I detect a theme of colonialism here?

Absolutely. Scanlon and Naomi come to the provinces with the plan of taking what they need, of bettering themselves, even exploiting the place and its people, and returning East: Scanlon

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with intellectual capital, Naomi with a perfume of her own creation made from a hormone secreted by the (fictional) Pacific Northwest leaping frog. Without giving away the end of the novel, I’ll say that I believe that Manifest Destiny is freighted with the same myths as other parts of the American Dream. One problem with reinvention, of course, is that as far as we travel, we can’t escape our pasts.

In addition to Scanlon and Naomi, the novel’s main characters are Clay, an anarchist who could be associated with the “black-mask” types based in Eugene, and Sequoia, a secessionist on the State of Jefferson mold. While many place the anarchist and the secessionist movements, as they have played out in Jefferson, at poles along the political spectrum, your novel hints at commonality among them. Can you expand on this?

The anarchists I researched and interviewed were pretty communal. They distrusted government in all forms, but also felt the need to work together on a very small scale to keep society and basic necessities in working order when the government collapses. Some of them even saw themselves as community organizers, taking and offering classes on how to make your own beer and shoes. Like the secessionists they value the local.²

Scanlon, you, and I represent what many in the State of Jefferson secessionist movement would describe as the “liberal elite,” a group they claim is unable—or unwilling—to understand them. How well-founded is this charge?

I think we must do the best we can. One huge obstacle is that we are not a part of their narrative. Or if we are, we’re what they define themselves in opposition to. Scanlon, as an academic, is flawed because on the one hand he feels powerful sympathies for the groups he studies (his academic niche is radical action and mass movements), so he becomes personally involved with them, and on the other hand he over analyzes to the point where he’s blind to the heart of a moment. I’ve tried to do better than Scanlon: to explore the deeply human hopes and dreams, the folly and futility, and that profound desire to make ourselves anew.

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²Scribner’s piece in the *Daily Beast* about the anarchist he met can be accessed at www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/07/21/american-anarchists-are-like-your-next-door-neighbor-keith-scribner.html