

## WHERE FACT MEETS FICTION

### By Craig Lancaster

Literary fiction brims with characters and settings that draw heavily upon – if not outright reflect – real-life models. Think of the nurse Catherine Barkley in Ernest Hemingway’s “A Farewell to Arms” ([http://www.amazon.com/Farewell-Arms-Ernest-Hemingway/dp/0684801469/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1280780551&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Farewell-Arms-Ernest-Hemingway/dp/0684801469/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1280780551&sr=8-1)); she was built from Agnes von Kurowsky, a nurse Hemingway fell in love with while in Italy during World War I. F. Scott Fitzgerald (Jay Gatsby), Philip Roth (Nathan Zuckerman), Pat Conroy (Ben Meechum) and hundreds more – all of these writers use fictional characters imbued with their own experience as vehicles to explore the thoughts and societal mores of their time and place.

So rather than be coy about the two main characters in my new novel “The Summer Son” ([http://www.amazon.com/Summer-Son-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1935597248/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1280780618&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Summer-Son-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1935597248/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1280780618&sr=1-1)) – Mitch Quillen and his estranged father, Jim – I’ll instead cop to the influences, and to the fictional extrapolations:

- Like Jim, my father was an exploratory well digger who spent his working days as an itinerant in the American West.
- Like Mitch, I was 3 when my parents divorced, and I went through much of my childhood separated from my father. Throughout my youth, I spent summers with him wherever he happened to be working at the time.
- Like Jim, my father grew up abused.
- Like Mitch, I spent the summer of 1979 in Milford, Utah. I was 9 years old; in the book, Mitch is 11.

For the most part, however, that’s where the similarities end. When I have an idea for a story, it’s often ignited by some real-world event – a memory, a news item, an anecdote I hear. I’m thankful for the initial spark, but really, that’s all it is. The meat on the bones comes in the days and weeks that follow, as I twist the idea around in my head and play “what-if” games: What if I change the setting or the circumstance? What if I put this character in extreme duress? What if the unthinkable happened? As those notions build, the idea takes on a critical mass that compels me to begin writing. That’s how I know I’m on to something. And by the time the “what ifs” are played out, my fictional idea often bears scant resemblance to the very real piece of inspiration that set it afire.

In writing “The Summer Son,” I was driven by two big “what ifs”:

What if a father and son had been separated for nearly 30 years by the fallout from a violent summer?

And what if one of them didn't know the whole truth?

The novel begins this way:

*The first call came on a Tuesday night. I yelled at Cindy from the garage to pick up. On the fourth ring, I dropped the armful of newspapers I was packing into the recycling bin and ran to the extension in the kitchen.*

*"Hello?"*

*"Mitch."*

*My guts coiled.*

*"Dad?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"What's up?"*

*"Nothing."*

*Seven words in, we hit the wall again. I counted on hearing from Dad once a year, somewhere around Christmas. I would return the favor of a call in March, on his birthday. We left the rest of the holidays and landmark dates to languish in the inertia of silence. To hear from him outside our usual calendar rattled me. I wasn't sure I wanted to press ahead and find out what prompted the call.*

*"So," I said, fracturing the uncomfortable silence that had settled over us. "What's been going on?"*

*"Nothing much. Just sitting here, watching TV."*

*"Not much happening here, either. You caught me cleaning up in the garage."*

*"If you're busy, I'll go ..."*

*“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I just thought Cindy and the kids were in the house, but I can see now” – I pulled back the kitchen curtains and saw my wife standing at the grill on the patio – “that they’re outside.”*

*“What are they doing?”*

*“Looks like Cindy’s grilling up some dinner. Avery and Adia are playing on the swing set.”*

*“You’re busy.”*

*“No, Dad, I’m not ...”*

*“I’ll call back another time.”*

*He was gone.*

I hope you’ll give “The Summer Son” a whirl and see where the story – mostly but not entirely fictional – goes from there.