

FATHERS AND SONS

By Craig Lancaster

Had I consciously picked a theme for my second 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) I would have been hard-pressed to come up with one more frequently examined in art than that of fathers and sons. Fortunately for my overall sanity and my fleeting hold on my insecurities, I didn’t pick a theme; I tried to tell a story, and if it’s one that plays out against a familiar set of family circumstances, it’s only because so much of what binds us as human beings exists there.

The relationship between men in a genealogical line often comes with built-in points of conflict. Our fathers give us names we must rise to, or ones we must live down. They give us examples to follow – or, as is too often the case, they are in absentia, leaving us longing or angry or determined to do better by our own offspring.

It’s against this latter backdrop that my story takes place. Mitch Quillen has arrived on the back end of his thirties with little to show. His career is stuck in neutral, his marriage is fraying, and he has accumulated plenty of losses already, and he blames those losses on his estranged father, Jim. When Jim calls out of the blue – only to hang up and then repeatedly call again in the days that follow – Mitch’s wife, Cindy, takes the initiative and compels him to confront his father at last and come to terms with the deep divisions between them, a relationship seemingly so far beyond repair that she doesn’t even know where it went wrong.

The result is a first-person trip through the present day, as Mitch and his father collide over past injuries and the lingering raw feelings, and backward through Mitch’s memories of a summer nearly thirty years in the dust, an alcohol-soaked time of violence for which Mitch blames his father without necessarily understanding all that was at stake. As the two storylines converge, there is hell to pay and, perhaps, a route to reconciliation.

Here’s an excerpt from the book, as the 11-year-old Mitch lies in bed, listening to his father and stepmother fight across the hall:

The words were quieter now, delivered in low tones so as not to rouse me. It was a senseless consideration. I lay in the dark, my eyes open, and took in every syllable.

“I hate it here,” she said. “I hate being with you out there. I deserve better.”

“This is the deal,” Dad said. “You knew it when you married me.”

“I didn’t know it would be like this.”

“That makes two of us.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t keep up. You’re bleeding us dry, gallivanting around. I come home and find you in Billings –“

“I was just having fun.”

“It looked fun, you and that guy.”

“He’s just a friend. Not that you’d know –”

“He was friendly, that much was clear. He can be friendly with a busted nose.”

“Oh, yeah, big man Jim. You can’t understand it, so you’ve got to hurt it.”

“Whore.”

“I didn’t do anything that you didn’t do first.”

“Lying whore.”

I turned over, wrapped the pillow around my head and said a silent prayer that it would end soon. It seemed to me, as I lay there in the dark, that Jerry had made the only sensible decision.

He had gotten out.

With a novel like this, written in first person and covering such emotional ground, I often get asked if it has autobiographical underpinnings. The answer, I’m afraid, isn’t so simple as a yes or a no. Jim and my father share a profession, and Mitch and I share some worldviews, but the emotional center of the story comes from a much darker place than anything I’ve experienced with my dad. We’ve had our struggles, mostly due to separation (I was raised primarily by my mother and stepfather) and interests (we have little in common), but those are distances we’ve been equal partners in trying to bridge, particularly in my adult years. The fiction I choose to write helps me purge many things, but I would be at loose ends if I tried to parse what is intensely mine and what is simply a function of trying to understand people and their motivations.

Did I succeed at getting below the surface of a difficult relationship in “The Summer Son”? I hope you’ll read it and judge for yourself.