

On setting a novel in Philadelphia
By Daniel Akst
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The first time I had anything like a date in Philadelphia I was 18, and had only recently found my way to the Penn campus by following a guy with a duffle bag from 30th St. station. I was a complete naïf, so deeply lost that had my unwitting guide been a student at Drexel, whose orange-brick campus we traversed en route, I might today be an engineer instead of a novelist.

Today I am a regular person with children, a mortgage, and the usual regrets, but back then I was a visitor from outer space, and when it was time for my date I had to struggle to read the signs. The girl lived with her widowed father in a brownstone near Rittenhouse Square, and while I was visiting he turned up with his girlfriend, who greeted me cheerfully in the strangest accent I had ever heard. Like some primitive computer, I scoured my infinitesimal databank of experience until I could place the voice. This woman, I realized, was doing the best damned Katherine Hepburn impersonation I had ever heard. It was uncanny, amazing, and for a brief, suicidal moment I looked for an opening to do my best Cary Grant, or maybe the perfect Jimmy Stewart. As the others talked I struggled to recall even a single line from Philadelphia Story, but something, maybe just shyness, told me to hold my tongue, because of course this was no put on, *it was how she really talked*, and it was then that I realized I was not in Brooklyn anymore.

Maybe this is why I recently decided to write a novel set in Philadelphia. Philadelphia was where I came to awareness, had my first drink, my first girl, my first experience of people who took ideas seriously. It was the first time I had been to a city that wasn't New York. There were no bialys in those days, no regular liquor stores, no really tall buildings. People ate scrapple.

Those are the reasons that say something about me. But there are others that say more about the city. My idea, see, was to write about a revolutionary in hiding, someone who had once participated in a violent act during violent times but is now living a life of bourgeois propriety spiced mainly by self-awareness. Philadelphia just seemed right for a bunch of reasons.

The whole revolutionary thing, for instance. Where better to set such a book? This city has always been a revolutionary place, after all. It's where William Penn could turn his heretical notions about religious tolerance into official policy, and later where the American Revolution would codify these and other freedoms, including freedom from the Crown. You can still see the Liberty Bell here, of course, or visit Independence Hall, although it's hard to imagine that any of my characters would do so.

But there's more than that. To this day, Philadelphia seems to me suffused by class consciousness, and with its broad accents and lingering indigenous aristocracy, may offer

less in the way of social mobility than my native New York or (God knows) my adopted second city of Los Angeles. Yet if Philadelphia has its confident local aristocrats, in the society of other cities it often finds itself feeling much less secure. Even its most patrician denizens must sometimes feel as if they are straining for recognition and status in a world that has somehow passed them by.

What a beautiful city to have a self-esteem problem. Yet the miasma of unease that engulfed Penn when I was a student there in the Seventies—over not being Harvard or Yale—echoes similar feelings about Philadelphia not being New York or Chicago. Heck, even Boston feels like a more important place, much as I hate to say it. To this day Philadelphia is the land of the overdressed, the nation's capital of frosted hair and too much makeup, even among women of fashion. I have a sense, wholly unsupported by evidence, that it matters more in Philadelphia than some other places who your father was—even if his connections are at the hiring hall rather than the country club. But it's the latter group whose capital Philadelphia has been for so long, with their sensible shoes and plummy accents so in contrast to the nearly-pure cockney of the city's white working classes. It's no wonder that the leading anthropologist of this patrician tribe, E. Digby Baltzell, was local.

For novelists going back to Stendhal or Thackeray as well as forward to Philip Roth (whose Newark is little more than an hour away on Amtrak), these tensions of accent and class and neighborhood have always been catnip. The great paradox of Philadelphia is the way it can seem both classbound and revolutionary at once, although now that I think about it, where else would you expect a revolution to brew? Philadelphia is still revolutionary, only peculiarly so. Remember MOVE? Or how about the Christian Association, back when I was in school an island of radicalism in the sea of conservatism that was then the Penn campus? Philadelphia seems to me the kind of place a hunted radical might hide in, a place where a woman of a certain social class, having outlived her own youthful fervor for radical change, might survive its consequences in West Philly or Lower Merion, depending on how invisible she hopes to become—or how concerned she is about the schools.

Philadelphia is revolutionary even in the way it has refused to succumb to the automobile. Yet in another sense its very ordinariness makes it appealing. Like Anne Tyler's Baltimore, Philadelphia is a place where people can lead something closer to ordinary life than they can in New York or San Francisco. Things aren't so expensive that people are driven solely by money or envy, leaving them free to talk about more than just real estate. Alexandra Freed, the heroine of Lisa Zeidner's novel of the same name, gets drunk on the steps of her friend's Philadelphia house with some youthful buddies who, in New York, couldn't possibly have a house.

And Philadelphia remains cheap enough to have character of the kind scrubbed away by developers and jet-setters in New York, or urban blight in lesser towns. Not just Jewelers Row or the Italian Market or Society Hill, but the smell of the subway-surface car tunnels, the small sofas you need in the very narrow rowhouses, the Plastic Club with its crumbling building on Camac and (when I was there) its sweetly awful art. Where else do

burly cops in crew cuts dress up in traditional homoerotic regalia—black leather jackets, riding boots, Sam Browne belts and officer’s caps—as if their uniforms were designed by Tom of Finland? I came across one of these on 34th and Sansom the other day, a Penn cop no less. Maybe the university isn’t so conservative after all.

Anyway, by setting a novel in Philadelphia, you get a choice. You have a real place if you want, as Jonathan Franzen obviously did when he evoked the city so powerfully in *The Corrections*. Or by relying on its power to grant ordinary life, the city needn’t get in your way much at all. This particular metropolis agreeably offers to be star or backdrop, as the writer might wish.

Philadelphia has a lot of other practical virtues for a novelist. It’s a walkable place, especially the core city, so that your characters, instead of driving everywhere insulated from novelistic events and experiences, can notice things or feel the weather or even have chance encounters with other characters. People here even ride transit! Think what you have to give up to set a novel in, say, Dallas. And of course, Philadelphia has history—history in spades, which is something any novelist except maybe Frederick Barthelme, who is to be admired for portraying people without it, ought to like.

The human scale, the depth of culture, the range of people and their obsessions—what it all adds up to is that Philadelphia is someplace *real*, which for a novelist is a handy thing indeed. It takes a lot of psychic energy to make things up. By setting a book in Philadelphia, I don’t have to waste any on the place. The only challenge—and it’s a big one—will be doing it justice.

Daniel Akst is the author of The Webster Chronicle, a novel. His previous work, St. Burl’s Obituary, was a PEN/Faulkner finalist.