

A TALE FOR THREE COUNTIES

Writing, according to Garth

Seattle author lands in WNY to share 'Tale' of an unusual dog

By Ben Beagle ■ bbeagle@batavianews.com

Garth Stein had already published two novels when he delivered his third manuscript to an agent. Stein had written a story about an unusual dog who longs to be human — and wishes for opposable thumbs.

"This is narrated by a dog ... Throw this away. I can't sell this. No one will read it," Stein recalled his agent telling him.

So Stein fired the agent and took his work to another agent. The conversation again began with "This is narrated by a dog ..."

Only this time, the agent added "I love it. I can sell it in a minute."

Soon, a phenomenon was born.

"The Art of Racing in the Rain," this year's pick in the "A Tale for Three Counties" community reading project, was published by HarperCollins in 2008. It became a Starbucks Pick that April.

There are t-shirts and hats celebrating Enzo, the novel's extraordinary dog. And the book has been on best-seller lists since its release.

"I understand people may not want to read a book told by a dog," Stein said in a telephone interview from his home near Seattle, Wash. "But if they give me a few pages, I'll get them. The voice of Enzo is a fun voice, and compelling."

And it's one that has been winning over readers in Genesee, Orleans and Wyoming counties where libraries have had waiting lists for the book, and some have even reached out to other library systems for copies to help meet demand.

"I think he has a lot to say. He's very philosophical," said Linda Daviau of Batavia, a regular Tale participant. "I was expecting more dog fluff, but once I had

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AN AUTHOR'S BEST FRIEND: Author Garth Stein plays around with his dog, Comet. "She's really silly and has insecurity issues," Stein says. "She's nothing like Enzo, and she's got a few more lifetimes before she's done."



Photo by Frank Huster

ACADEMY AWARDS

Tarantino film carries on proud WWII history

By David Germain
AP Movie Writer

LOS ANGELES — Quentin Tarantino rewrote the ending of World War II with "Inglourious Basterds," his "Dirty Dozen"-style commando adventure that is nominated for best picture at Sunday's Academy Awards.

Filmmakers have been writing the war itself into Oscar history almost since combat broke out. No other subject has resulted in more key Oscar contenders, with nearly three dozen World War II-themed films nominated for best picture, starting with Charles Chaplin's 1940 Nazi satire "The Great Dictator."

Seven films with the war as a backdrop have won the top prize at the Oscars — roughly one in 10 of the best-picture winners since 1940.

The winners are bookended by two wartime romantic adventures, 1943's "Casablanca" and 1996's "The English Patient."

Also winning best picture were 1946's homecoming drama "The Best Years of Our Lives";



The Weinstein Company

MAN ON A MISSION: Brad Pitt prepares his unit for a Nazi-hunting mission in a scene from "Inglourious Basterds." It is nominated for best picture and even other Academy Awards.

1953's Pearl Harbor saga "From Here to Eternity"; 1957's prisoner-of-war tale "The Bridge on the River Kwai"; 1970's film biography "Patton"; and 1993's Holocaust epic "Schindler's List."

Sunday's ceremony marks the first time since the heart of the war that 10 films, rather than the usual five, are competing for best picture. That last time came with the triumph of "Casablanca," when two other World War II tales — "In Which We Serve" and "Watch on the Rhine" — also were among the 10 nominees.

Other best-picture contenders over the decades have included Holocaust dramas (1959's "The Diary of Anne Frank," 1998's "Life Is Beautiful"

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Tuning In
ABC's schedule for the 82nd Academy Awards includes:

7 P.M. — THE BARBARA WALTERS SPECIAL: In what Walters has said will be her last Oscar night special, the journalist interviews nominees Sandra Bullock and Mo'Nique, and spotlights 29 years of the Academy Award specials.

8 P.M. — OSCARS RED CARPET ... 2010: The live broadcast begins as celebrities arrive for the annual ceremony.

8:30 P.M. — THE 82ND ANNUAL ACADEMY AWARDS: Honors for achievements in film take place at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles; Steve Martin and Alec Baldwin host.

ABC: WKBW-TV, channel 7 in Buffalo, and WHAM-TV, channel 13 in Rochester.

LIVING BETTER

Frozen foods in the spotlight

March is National Frozen Food Month. Frozen fruits and vegetables offer lots of health and financial benefits.

Did you know that frozen produce may be even fresher than fresh produce, especially in the winter when fresh produce travels many miles and days to reach our supermarkets?

How? Frozen produce is picked, processed and frozen at its peak of freshness, helping to preserve its nutrients. Fresh produce starts losing some of its nutrients during shipping, while sitting at the supermarket, then while stored in your refrigerator. Best of all, frozen produce is always "in season" and available year round.

When buying any frozen food, choose food in packages that are clean, firm, ice free and undamaged. At the supermarket, pack all your frozen foods together to keep them cool. In summer, place frozen foods in a cooler with ice or ice packs for the trip home. Stop at the frozen foods department just before you head to the check out.

Store frozen foods at 0 degrees in your freezer to keep them safe. This temperature also helps to retain the nutrients in the food. Use a freezer thermometer to make sure your freezer is



Jen REARDON

set correctly. Frozen fruit is best used within 8 to 12 months and frozen vegetables are at their best when used within 8 months.

Cook frozen vegetables until tender-crisp, so they still have a bit of crunch when you chew them. Boiling frozen vegetables in too much water only helps to drain the vitamins and minerals from the food and to make them mushy. Try steaming (on the stove or in the microwave), stir frying, roasting, slow cooking or adding frozen vegetables to soups, stews and casseroles for best results.

Frozen fruit only needs to be thawed to be eaten or can be used frozen in fruit smoothies.

Frozen fruits and vegetables have come a long way in how they are processed and many are now individually quick frozen or flash frozen, which means each piece of fruit or vegetable is frozen separately and very

quickly. This processing method provides for a product more closely resembling fresh produce texture and flavor.

Frozen produce is easier on your budget because you pay only for the edible parts of the fruits and vegetables, so there is no waste. With fresh produce, you are paying for pits, seeds, skins and peels. Frozen produce has a longer shelf life than fresh produce, so you have less chance of the produce spoiling before you can use it. Frozen fruits and vegetables also are convenient because you can use as much or as little from the package as you need at one time. An added bonus — frozen produce is already washed, prepped and cut for use in recipes, so your cooking preparation time is shorter.

Many frozen fruits and vegetables have nothing added to them — no sugar, no salt, no preservatives, so they easily fit into your family's healthy eating plan and food budget.

Jen Reardon trains nutrition educators in seven counties at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Genesee County. Her column is published on the first Saturday of each month in The Daily News.

Tech Test: Devour smart phone not that satisfying. — *CyberLife*, page B-2.

Urban Fantasy Novels: A genre that women sink their teeth into. — *Books*, page B-3.

Oscar Inspiration: Cocktails to toast the movies. — *Taste*, page B-4.



Stein

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read the first three or four chapters I couldn't put it down."

The Tale project, started in 2003, encourages readers in each of the counties to pick up the same book, read it and discuss it. They can then meet the author during a series of talks and book signings in each county. Stein visits Thursday through next Saturday.

Enzo's story

Enzo is different from most dogs. He has the voice of a philosopher and a very human soul, he tells us in the book's first-person narrative.

The Labrador-and (likely)-terrier mix has learned by listening closely to the words of his master, Denny Swift, a promising race-car driver, and by watching a lot of television, which has convinced him that dogs can reincarnate into a human if they are compassionate and understand humans.

Through Denny, Enzo has gained tremendous insight into the human condition and sees that life, like racing, isn't just about going fast, but that techniques needed for success on the race track can also help navigate life's ordeals.

And on the eve of Enzo's death, as the dog takes stock of his life, readers see the struggles the family has lived through: the unexpected death of Denny's wife Eve, Denny's battle with his in-laws for custody of his daughter Zoe, and his sacrifices for family and career.

The character of Enzo, Stein said, has "taken on enough that he became separate from me. Enzo started to tell me the story."

What came first: Denny or the dog?

The idea for "The Art of Racing in the Rain" originated from "State of Dogs," a Mongolian film that came across Stein's desk about a decade ago, when he was working as a documentary filmmaker in New York City. The film explored the belief among certain people of Mongolia that dogs reincarnate as people.

"I thought that was a cool idea," Stein said. "But how would I write about it?"

The answer would be found a few years later when Stein, since relocated to Seattle, attended a poetry reading by Billy Collins. The 2004 reading included a poem, "The Revenant," told from the perspective of a euthanized dog addressing his former master from heaven.

"It was very funny, very amusing."

Stein said. "And then, oh, wait, that poem was speaking to me!"

Once he had Enzo, the rest was easy, Stein said.

The racing came naturally for the author, who raced a Miata on Sports Car Club of America circuit for about four years. He stopped racing after crashing into a wall — in the rain, in Seattle.

"If you simplify racing and you simplify life, they pretty much amount to the same thing," Stein said.

Other plot elements arrived from the travails of a close friend and race-car driver. Stein also remembers sitting with his father and the family dog, Muggs, and watching races on television when Stein was about 5 years old. The dog, he said, seemed to be watching.

"So I guess I've been writing this story for 40 years," Stein said.

Pushing limits

Choosing to use a dog as narrator had some advantages. It also came with disadvantages — and more than just Enzo's frustrations about lacking opposable thumbs or an ability to speak.

Enzo — named for Enzo Ferrari, of Ferrari automobile fame — offered a unique perspective for creating drama, Stein said. People will often say things in front of the dog that they would not say in front of other people. But at the same time, access for the dog is limited. The court room scenes, for example, are pieced together by Enzo from what he hears from the humans.

"One big problem was getting the reader to suspend disbelief. For the most part, it's fiction and 97 percent of the readers are perfectly happy," Stein said, a hint of mischievousness sneaking into his voice as he adds, "It's that sticky 3 percent — mostly all

reviewers for newspapers and magazines."

But fiction, Stein said, "is supposed to push the limits and try things."

"It's not all telling of facts. It's also telling of heart and emotion. You can do that with Enzo," he said. "You can go into certain musings that, if they were said by humans, no person would say."

'Somewhere, the zebra ...'

Enzo is a philosophical old dog. The "Enzoisms," as the dog's philosophical musings have come to be called, are things that Stein said he has actually heard.

For example, "Your car goes where your eyes go." Or, "that which you manifest is before you." And "the visible becomes the inevitable."

"Race care drivers in the paddock really do talk like that," he said. "A lot of the phrases I took straight on."

The most popular "Enzoism" is arguably "Somewhere, the zebra is dancing," which has sparked a lot of speculation about what it means. Stein said he gets asked about the zebra frequently, but he tries to deflect the question back to the person asking.

"You know what (the zebra) is," he said. "It's what you decide it to be. It's more fun that way."

"If it was easy to figure, if it was only one thing, there'd be less dialogue, less chat. One of the goals of a writer is not just reading, but discussing," Stein said. "If

you just say the answer is 'x,' that's not fine. If nine different people read the book, you may have nine separate ideas of the

Author visits begin Thursday

Garth Stein, author of "The Art of Racing in the Rain," is scheduled to make four public appearances as part of the "A Tale for Three Counties" community reading project. At each program, Stein will discuss the book, make time for readers' questions, and sign copies of the book. Books are available for purchase at area libraries and book stores. The schedule:

MARCH 11: 1 p.m. at Genesee Community College, 1 College Rd., Batavia.

MARCH 11: 7 p.m. at Richmond Memorial Library, 19 Ross St., Batavia.

MARCH 12: 7 p.m. at Lee-Weldon Memorial Library 620 West Ave. Medina.

MARCH 13: 2 p.m. at Perry Elementary/Middle School, 50 Olin Ave., Perry, a program hosted by Perry Public Library.

zebra. Without conversation, there is no change. That's one of the things I find in politics," he said, then apologizes for venturing far afield from his original thoughts.

From film to books

Stein, who teaches writing and has been a writer-in-residence at Seattle-area schools, grew up in Seattle, went to college at Columbia and lived in New York for 18 years before moving with his family back to Seattle.

"It was a lifestyle decision," Stein said. "New York City is a tough place to live unless you're independently wealthy and have a driver."

The return to his roots has also been fortunate, too, for professional reasons. All three of Stein's books have been set in the Pacific Northwest, and so will a fourth.

"In New York there are no local writers," Stein said. "It's all big fish in a huge megalopolis. Everyone is chum. You can't make an identity for yourself."

Stein nearly had a different identity, but screenwriting didn't work and he burnt out as a documentary filmmaker. He had always been a writer, he said, but convinced himself to study film in college. He got a master of fine arts degree in film from Columbia University and hoped for a screenwriting career.

"But I didn't adapt to that very well," Stein said. "I was very frustrated as a screenwriter, but I was finding that I was very fascinated by documentary films."

He went on to make several well-received films, including "The Lunch Date," which won an Academy Award for best live action short in 1991, and "The Last Party," in which Robert Downey Jr. gave reports and interviews from the 1992 Democratic National Convention.

Through his filmmaking Stein learned about storytelling, while growing tired of film after nine years.

"Documentary film was a different market when I was making them in the '90s, the pre-digital age. They were very expensive to make," he said. "Ninety percent of time spent raising money, and only 10 percent of the creative aspect."

So, Stein went back to writing. He revisited screenplays. Still the

process was a struggle. "I was not very good," he said.

He began writing a short story, thinking that he could "muscle it into a screenplay." Instead, as Stein wrote, the story got longer and longer. It eventually became "Raven Stole the Moon," a story of a grieving mother who travels to Alaska to find the truth about her son's disappearance. It was published in 1998, and will be re-released on Tuesday. (A sequel is also in the works.)

A second book, "How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets" arrived in 2005, winning a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award. It is the story of a 31-year-old musician who suddenly finds himself raising a 14-year old son he never met.

The winner's circle

To promote his first two novels Stein would travel from store to store, to libraries, anything that would get him on readers' radar.

"I really had to get out and hustle my books," Stein said.

That meant readings and book-signings with large audiences, some with only three or four and many in between. But even those with little attendance were beneficial, Stein said, as he was still able to build relationships with the booksellers.

"I'd tell them that when I have a bestseller I'm going to come back and we'll fill the place," Stein said.

"The Art of Racing in the Rain" followed, and unlike earlier books, "Rain" came relatively easy. Once he began writing, the manuscript was finished in about four months — faster than he had ever written before.

"I didn't think too much about it," Stein said. "Once I had the characters I felt the book start to happen and my job was just to take notes."

A new novel is expected in the summer 2011 and a fifth book is on the horizon.

"In a sense, I prefer it this way," Stein said. "I can appreciate everything that has gone on with 'The Art of Racing in the Rain' because I know what it's like to get a \$7,000 advance and sell 3,000 books. I can appreciate what happens knowing that with my first two books that didn't happen. It's made me more appreciative of the response from readers."



Photo by Frank Huster

Comet, front, poses with Garth Stein.

Tarantino

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and 2002's "The Pianist"); battle epics (1942's "Wake Island," 1962's "The Longest Day" and 1997's "Saving Private Ryan"); naval and aerial stories (1949's "Twelve O'Clock High," 1954's "The Caine Mutiny" and 1955's "Mister Roberts"); crime and justice narratives (1961's "Judgment at Nuremberg," 1984's "A Soldier's Story" and 2008's "The Reader"); and home-front chronicles (1942's "Mrs. Miniver" and 1987's "Hope and Glory").

Before "Inglourious Basterds," the most recent best-picture contender set during the war was 2006's "Letters From Iwo Jima."

While set years after the war, "The Reader" earned Kate Winslet the best-actress Oscar a year ago for her role as a former concentration camp guard on trial. Other acting winners for World War II-themed films include William Holden for 1953's "Stalag 17," Frank Sinatra and Donna Reed for "From Here to Eternity," George C. Scott for "Patton," Juliette Binoche for "The English Patient" and Adrien Brody for "The Pianist."

With eight Oscar nominations, "Inglourious Basterds" runs second to the sci-fi tale "Avatar" and "The Hurt Locker," which have nine nominations each.

'Hurt' star, director worked from distance

Best-actor nominee Jeremy Renner captured the attention of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences with his performance as a risk-taking bomb disposal technician in "The Hurt Locker," the tense Iraq war drama directed by Kathryn Bigelow, who is also nominated for an Oscar.

Renner and Bigelow have been making the rounds on awards shows, spending more time together than they did most days on the set of "The Hurt Locker" in Jordan. "I rarely saw her throughout the day," Renner tells The Associated Press. "The sets were so big, and the cameras were so far away. I would maybe see her once in the daytime. There were days we would see the cameras more if we got into close quarters, but it was so hot and so intense that you just didn't realize you were shooting a movie half the time."

"Avatar" and "The Hurt Locker" are considered the best-picture front-runners, but "Inglourious Basterds" seems certain to win at least one major prize. Dominating at earlier Hollywood

honors, Christoph Waltz is heavily favored to earn the supporting-actor Oscar for his "Basterds" role as a chillingly amiable Nazi known as the Third Reich's ace Jew hunter.

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