

NewsOK: "Tulsa artist wrote unintentional memoir chance meeting propelled Joe Andoe to unexpected book project", 'Jubilee City' "by Brandy McDonnell , September 21st, 2007

Internationally renowned artist Joe Andoe never intended to branch out into writing. But his discovery of e-mail, a sarcastic comment from his ex-wife and a blind date led to the publication of "Jubilee City: A Memoir at Full Speed," a bluntly honest and darkly funny account of his rough childhood in east Tulsa, his college years at the University of Oklahoma and his New York art career.

"I never thought in a million years I'd write a book. I never wrote. I was a terrible English student. I went to East Central High School and then I went to Tulsa Junior College, and I just barely passed every English class I ever entered. You know, I'm dyslexic, and I don't have the attention span to read much. ... So I never really thought about it," Andoe said in a recent phone interview from his Manhattan, N.Y., studio/home.

In 2000, Andoe got an Apple computer and discovered e-mail. He used it to deal with problems with his art business and his ex-wife. For the first time, he felt he was being heard.

"The thing I didn't know about the e-mail was there's a thing called Spell Check," he said, laughing. "I was sending out these elaborate e-mails that were so grammatically, like, messed up. Everything was spelled wrong."

His former spouse, an aspiring writer, was taking his ungrammatical messages to her writing group and passing them around for laughs.

"She told me, 'Oh, these are funny, you should seriously try writing.' And she was just mocking me. And so, I sort of took her suggestion, and I started writing down stories," he said.

The artist started a project called "Twice-Told Stories," writing down his yarns so he wouldn't tell them to the same person twice. He read one tale to friend and fellow painter Jimmy Gilroy, who suggested that Andoe type it up and send it to a pal who was starting a literary journal. Andoe's story was printed in "Bald Ego"; others were published in "Bomb" and "Open City" magazines.

He gave the leaflets to anybody who would take one. Among the recipients: a woman he went with on a blind lunch date.

"I didn't know that she worked for HarperCollins (Publishers). She took it back to work, she read it and gave it to her boss. And (she) called me back in a couple of days and asked me if I would write a novel," Andoe said.

"And I was thinking, 'I can't even remember the last novel I read all the way through.' And I just said yeah. I was thinking, 'How hard could it be?' You know, there's millions of books."

His process was simple: He lined up his stories chronologically, filled in the gaps and wrote until he reached the number of words he was told to fulfill. Then, he put "the end" on the book.

"They're all true stories, so it ended up being a memoir," he said.

The wild chapters cover drugs and sex, marriage and divorce, art and parenthood. The book chronicles his poor and troubled childhood, including his first run-in with the police. He was in kindergarten and had dismantled his neighbors' brick incinerator.

In high school, he and his friends engaged in drunken partying and fast driving. Problems with alcohol dogged him into adulthood; he said he doesn't drink anymore.

One of his favorite chapters details the community service he performed at the Tulsa Zoo after an arrest for underage driving. The job involved shoveling animal excrement.

"For where I came from, I stayed out of trouble mostly," he said. "My two best friends I grew up with ended up in prison, and one just got out of prison for the second time. And I ended up in college."

Art saved him. As a child, he showed artistic talent, but he didn't know he could make art his career until he was at junior college. His art teacher was selling paintings for \$900 each.

"That was how much my pickup truck cost, and I could do it as well as he could. So I just put all my chips on that square," Andoe said.

He got a master of fine arts from OU and in 1982 moved to New York, where he felt like an outsider and struggled to sell his paintings. One chapter recounts his breakthrough: Swiss art collector Thomas Ammann saw Andoe's paintings in the back room of a gallery. He visited the artist's studio and bought every painting he had. Word spread, and Andoe's art is now in top museums across the country.

Andoe is best known for his monochromatic paintings done in the reduction method, in which he covers a canvas in black paint and then wipes it away to create images of landscapes, people or horses. Many of his paintings depict his Oklahoma roots.

The Tulsa native said he hopes his memoir helps people better understand his artwork. He has an idea for another book, if asked, but thinks his future lies in painting.

"I already wrote the only thing I know anything about and that's myself," he said with a laugh.