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The Six Pack with John Dufresne

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[The Six Pack Interviews](#)



The secret is out on Florida. It's wild place, strange and beautiful, with a twisted past and an equally twisted present. And while there is no shortage of writers mining Florida for its in-built audacity, few are capable of imbuing the strangeness with heroism and compassion. Such is the accomplishment of John Dufresne's latest novel, [No Regrets, Coyote](#).

On the surface, *NRC* satisfies the requisite needs of the crime novel. There's a body at the opening of the book—quite a number of bodies actually—a scarcity of clues and plenty suspects to choose from. There's a detective (or detective-type) who snoops around and a sidekick who might be more memorable than he is. There's violence and humor and, by the end of the book, we've wrapped up the case. But that's where the similarities end.

No Regrets, Coyote is the story of Wylie "Coyote" Melville, a therapist turned "volunteer forensic consultant" ("I read faces and furniture") and his attempts to get to the bottom of the Halliday family murders. Yet, it's also the story of Wylie's endlessly dysfunctional family (an ex-girlfriend, a slightly schizoid sister, and

an ailing father), of a charming squatter that takes residence in his yard, of departmental corruption in all its guises, of a poker-playing, sleight of hand artist that talks about magic as though he were talking about writing, of the slew of patients—and their convoluted love lives—that parade through Wylie's office. It's a story of betrayal, love and loss, the ties that bind, and the horrors that we are capable of when we believe we've run out of options.

That said, the most surprising quality of this book, especially for a crime fic novel, is just how big its heart is. There are a number of moments that are so tender and compassionate that you forget, if for a moment, that there are vicious murderers on the lam. In tackling the literary thriller, Dufresne showcases his considerable talents (wit, wordplay, insights into human nature, astounding capacity for character) but to compare this book to those of Chandler's or Leonard's or Hissens's would be to misrepresent the book. This is a literary thriller, with the emphasis on literary. The plot isn't front and center in *NRC*. It's the characters, their hearts, their desires, their failures and their attempts to right the wrongs that drive this book forward.

In advance of his reading at [Skylight Books](#), we spoke with John to ask about what drives him as a writer, the challenges of the crime writer and what about Florida makes it ripe for fiction.

CBBC: I'm always intrigued by the collusion of events that drive someone to want to write. Can you recall your earliest memories of wanting to write, of actually attempting to write? What was the catalyst in your life that made you want to write, and what were those early writings like?

JD: I wrote a very uninspired autobiography when I was in fourth grade. Mostly lists probably inspired by teen magazines. Favorite color, pet peeves, favorite TV shows. That sort of thing. I still have it. I was a good writer in elementary school. Writing was really the only thing I was good at. And when I was praised, I became determined to write more. Writing is a rather pathetic and blatant attempt to ask for love and attention. I fell in love with the Romantic poets in high school and started writing poetry. I wrote very neatly in thirteen notebooks, which I can see on the bookshelf from my desk. (I am, however, afraid to open them.) Lots of unrequited love. I wrote these hundreds of poems in secret. Never showed them to anyone or mentioned what I was doing to anyone. I didn't know it then, but I was preparing myself to be a serious writer one day. It wasn't hard. I loved it. What was hard was the uninspired writing we were asked to do in the classroom. Then when I read *Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Bounty Trilogy*, and *Crime and Punishment*, one after another, I decided that's the kind of writing I wanted to do—storytelling.

CBBC: Your newest novel, *No Regrets, Coyote* is your fifth novel. If there were one thing the current-day John Dufresne could go back in time and tell the younger you, the version of you working on his first book, what would you say? What bit of advice would you give yourself?

JD: Bring your patience to the writing desk. Don't expect too much from the first draft. Get comfortable with failure. Better bring your tenacity as well. Don't stop till it's finished. Don't think it'll get finished today or this week or anytime soon.

CBBC: *No Regrets, Coyote* is a new dimension for you in that it's a thriller. What was one challenge in writing a mystery that you didn't foresee going into the book, a challenge that you didn't face with the earlier novels?

JD: The real difference was that I had five corpses at the end of the first chapter. And I had no idea who did it. And when I got to page 250 I still didn't know. Plot is foregrounded in a crime novel, but plot is still rooted in character, and it's the characters I'm interested in exploring. Wylie had to resolve the plot. By the way the poet Christopher Merrill told me he met Tony Hillerman, and Hillerman told Chris that he didn't know who did it till he wrote the penultimate page. I felt redeemed. [Hillerman was, of course, an acknowledged genius at the genre.](#)

CBBC: You're a voracious reader, for pleasure and stimulation, but also for research and inspiration. What were you some of the books you were reading during the writing of *No Regrets*, *Coyote*, and how did they come to influence the novel?

JD: I probably [read three or four hundred books in the course of writing *Coyote*](#). I read lots of poetry and fiction, of course, and only a few were in the crime genre. I did, however, read nonfiction about crime and criminals. I overdid research to begin with. Perhaps I was anxious about tackling this crime genre. Intimidated, I suppose. I read or perused books on police procedure: [The Law Enforcement Handbook by Rowland and Bailly](#) and *The Crime Writer's Reference Guide* by Martin Roth were two. There were several more. I found the poker book [Read 'Em and Weap](#) by Joe Navarro helpful. Navarro's *What Everybody Is Saying* helped me think about body language. I also read *WITSEC* by Early and Shur and *The Unknown Darkness* by Gregg O. McCrary. The most enjoyable and helpful book I read was [Slights of Mind: What the Neuroscience of Magic Reveals about Our Everyday Deceptions](#) by Stephen L. Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde.

CBBC: Rather recently Adam Gopnik took to the New Yorker to discuss the growing interest in Florida crime fiction and referred to it as "Florida Glare," a uniquely Floridian relationship between crime and crime fiction. Do you think there is a uniquely Floridian fiction? If so, what is distinctive about it, and what are its parameters?

JD: And rather more recently, you wrote the definitive piece on [South Florida Noir in Salon](#). Fortunately, I printed it out and was able to refer to it this morning in an interview when I was asked about the history of Florida crime fiction. John D. McDonald, I said. Charles Willeford. So thanks for that. There does seem to be a uniquely Floridian crime fiction, doesn't there? The place is so lovely and serene that it invites mayhem. That's my theory. So we get hurricanes and we get copious blood spilled on the pages of novels. Some one of the online digests just voted Miami the most miserable city in the country. What more could a fiction writer ask for? The only measurement the survey used was housing. (Online surveys seem to be only excuses for tedious slide shows.) And the housing market is a mess here for sure. South Florida is crazy with writers. We have the largest book fair in the country, [one of the country's great bookstores, Books & Books](#); we've got two MFA programs, O Miami, the Palm Beach Poetry Festival, the Key West Literary Seminars. There's at least one reading in Miami every night of the year except Christmas Eve when not a creature is stirring except Wylie Melville and Bay Lettigue. What writer wouldn't want to live in a place that loves the book so ardently? Some cities' literary glory days are in the past. When we think of San Francisco, we think the Beats, the fifties and sixties. Maybe Florida's literary glory days are just beginning.

CBBC: Lastly, I know you're a big Alice Munro fan. When news came through that [she was retiring from writing](#), you were the first person I thought of. What did you think when you heard the news? Do you believe a writer could ever truly retire?

JD: I don't think she'll stop writing. I think she may take a holiday, but she'll find herself back at that orderly writing desk in the corner of her dining room soon enough. She may choose, however, as Salinger did, not to publish. I hope she still does. If not, we have all those transcendent stories to re-read again and again. [In fact, I think it's time to re-read "Carried Away."](#) So that's what I'm going to do. It's raining here in Paradise. The monkeys have slipped back into the mangroves, and the cats are dozing on my writing desk. The roof isn't leaking too badly yet. I'll pour a drink, pick up *Selected Stories*, and head for the sofa.

John Dufresne is the author of five novels: *Louisiana Power & Light*, *Love Warps the Mind a Little*, (both *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year) *Deep in the Shade of Paradise*, *Requiem, Mass.*, and *No Regrets, Coyote*. He also wrote two short story collections: *The Way That Water Enters Stone* and *Johnny Too Bad*, as well as three chapbooks: *Lethe, Cupid, Time and Love; Well Enough Alone*; and *I Will Eat a Piece of the Roof and You Can Eat the Window*. He has two books on writing and creativity: *The Lie That Tells a Truth: a Guide to Writing Fiction* and *Is Life Like This?: a Guide to Writing Your First Novel in Six Months*.

John was a 2012-13 Guggenheim Fellow and teaches in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami.

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