

The Story Behind the Book DON'T I KNOW YOU?

by Karen Shepard

July of 1978 was the summer before I attended 8th grade, at the Bank Street School for Children, on 112th Street between Broadway and Riverside in New York City. Bank Street was a small private school where you called your teachers by their first names, didn't receive grades, and worked on projects like digging up rocks in Central Park for the chimney of your model of a genuine Colonial house.

That summer, the twenty of us who had been in 7th grade together received a letter printed in purple mimeograph ink. It was from our teacher. He was writing to let us know some news about one of our classmates. Steven's mother had been murdered. In her apartment.

Here's the way I remembered the story as I was able to piece it together: Steven had found his mother's stabbed body. She had been stabbed a lot. Her underwear had been tied around her ankles. He went to live with his father, far away. We never saw him again. He became one of those classmates on the lists of the missing in alumni newsletters and reunion invitations. No one in our circle kept track of him.

I started seriously writing fiction in college, and some of my earliest stories were about him. I wrote about a seventh-grade boy with Ringo hair and sad eyes who made melodramatic pronouncements about himself: He would be dead by the time he was eighteen. "Color My World" was his favorite song. Even before his mother died, there had been something about him to which we—boys and girls—had all been drawn. That he was beautiful had something, but not everything, to do with it. The boys wanted to be him; the girls wanted to save him. I probably only realize this in retrospect, though. At the time, I simply had a crush on him. And he, well, he liked the other girls. Sometimes Alina. Sometimes Kaethe. Never me. So, on one level, writing about him in fiction was a way to pin him down, make him mine on the page if not in life. Fiction as simple wish fulfillment.

But he kept coming up in my stories. Sometimes I associated him with father characters, or brothers, or boyfriends. Or mothers. So part of the origin of this novel was

asking myself why he haunted me. What did he mean to me? Why, besides the horrible event of his mother's murder, did I return to him again and again?

I was also excited about exploring New York City in the seventies. There was something gritty and almost scary about New York then, as if you might see literally anything when you walked down the street. I lived in an upper class apartment building near Central Park West, but just down the block was a welfare hotel where they found a body chopped into pieces in one of the garbage cans behind the building. A few blocks away was Needle Park. It was gritty and scary, but there was also a sense that good things were coming, like the risky beginning to some kind of American Dream. Anything was possible. Anything could happen. And, something did: Steven's mother was murdered.

I don't know whether anyone was ever arrested or convicted. I do know that, at the time, if a murder wasn't solved in the first seventy-two hours, it usually wasn't solved. There were too many murders in New York in the Seventies. I don't know where Steven is now.

Once I had a draft of the novel, I began to do some investigating, and discovered the limitations of my own memory. Steven had not found the body; when his mother hadn't answered the phone, a worried friend called the police. Steven's father hadn't lived far away, but in another part of the City. Steven had started and finished eighth grade with us, graduating as we all did, and going onto high school as we all did. That's the last I know about how his life turned out.

So the revisions of the book became a chance to explore why I had misremembered things the way I had. And a chance to imagine and invent the consequences of an event like this one. In doing so, I had to do a lot more research: what would happen after a murder like this one? How would detectives treat a child witness? What kind of investigation would take place? I read a lot. I pulled some strings with an old friend (another member of that 7th grade class) who now works in the Manhattan District Attorney's office, and got to hang out with DA's for the day. I spoke with her boss, a former homicide detective. I spoke with the former police commissioner of NY. He put me in touch with his cousin, a retired homicide detective. I knew I was onto a good story when that detective called me back one night and said that he and his friends,

all retired detectives, had been at their weekly night out together, drinking at a local bar, and they'd been discussing my book. They had some plot suggestions.

I also looked through lots of photos of New York from that time period. I made a kind of ragged timeline of events that were occurring in the city and nationally. I reread my diaries from that time—a truly humiliating undertaking, by the way. I talked to friends who remembered Steven.

I read from the manuscript recently, and someone in the audience asked if Steven would recognize himself and his story. I was stumped, though I shouldn't have been. The book isn't really his story. It is, of course, a work of imagination. But insofar as everything a novelist writes is *from* his life, as opposed to *about* his life, this book is an investigation of the ripple effects Steven has had on me, so it is, after all, my story, at least in emotional terms, rather than literal ones.

At one point, my friend in the DA's office told me that a case had crossed her desk: a man named Steven S _____ had been indicted for murdering his father. This Steven was the same age as our Steven would've been. Had he grown up to kill his father? *Had* his father had something to do with the murder of Steven's mother? The questions kept proliferating. But in writing the book, I did, at least in part, find out why Steven and his story stayed with me. But that I'm not going to tell you. For that, you'll have to read the book.