

From the Inside, Looking Out

To write as an insider, novelist Stephen Schottenfeld immerses himself in unfamiliar worlds.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

Huddy Marr is having a tough time of it. The protagonist in Stephen Schottenfeld's novel *Bluff City Pawn*, he's a businessman who knows his products and his customers well. And he aspires to improve his inventory, raise his bottom line, and attract a better sort of clientele.

But it's after the financial crash of 2008. He's smack in the city of Memphis, a place still haunted by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. And the business Huddy is in is pawnshops.

Schottenfeld, a winner of multiple awards for short stories, spent five years on the faculty of Memphis's Rhodes College before coming to Rochester in 2008. In 2013, he was named the James P. Wilmot Assistant Professor of English. Originally from tony Westchester County, New York, he's an unlikely person to write convincingly about the Southern white working class. But he approaches the world of his characters like a journalist, writing not what he knows, but what he comes to know, through immersion and deep research, and to which he brings a strong dose of empathy and imagination.

"I don't really go up and accost people on the street," says Schottenfeld, who came to know quite a few pawnbrokers before embarking on the novel, his first, which was released by Bloomsbury USA in August. "If you come in, and you're respectful, and you want to learn about their lives, most of the time they're open to talking."

The inspiration for the story came from a single street called Summer Avenue. He became acquainted with it on an exploratory drive—something he likes to do often, and did as soon as he arrived in Memphis in 2003.

"A lot of it was in disrepair," he says of the avenue and its long stretch of commercial strips. "The nicest places were fast food restaurants."

Pawnshops, check cashing joints, and used auto lots dotted the avenue.

"I like to write about work lives," Schottenfeld says. "I like the way it brings a specificity of place, a specificity of language, a kind of code that I investigate. I tell them I want to write fiction, that I'm not a journalist, which always helps actually," he says. "It makes them feel like I'm not asking for anyone's name. I'm just looking for kind of the texture of what they do."

Upon this texture, Schottenfeld invented a narrative of three brothers—the ever-striving Huddy, the itinerant Harlan, and the highly leveraged real estate dealer Joe—each of whom represents a different

aspect of the economic lives of the contemporary white working class.

Schottenfeld has been praised for addressing social class tension in his work.

"I was thrilled to see that Stephen's book adopts a pawn shop proprietor as a protagonist," says novelist Anthony Doerr. "Huddy lives at the intersections between all sorts of economic classes, and his financial desperation—his yearning for a better future—is something I think a lot of Americans are feeling right now."


Schottenfeld says the characters he created are not necessarily mirrors of the people he met and talked to on Memphis's Summer Avenue. If they had been, he'd have been writing nonfiction. "I'm not a nonfiction writer," he says, adamantly. "I'm interested in getting behind what I'm seeing to some sort of fictional truth—that truth about where these characters had grown up and where Memphis was in terms of race and class; what the suburbs represented to them, and what they are."

Could he pull that off as an outsider? To Schottenfeld, that's the wrong question to ask. "Not being from the South, in writing a book like this, what I said to myself was, 'How could I live in Memphis and not write about Memphis?'"

Since his arrival at the River Campus, Schottenfeld has taught fiction writing and screenwriting, in addition to modern and contemporary literature. He relishes dialogue, and counts numerous playwrights—such as Harold Pinter, David Mamet, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Caryl Churchill—as among the writers he most admires.

Schottenfeld is a graduate of some of the most prestigious writing programs in the nation, including the master's program in fiction writing at Johns Hopkins and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Yet he says he came to writing in a different way than you often hear writers describe.

"I feel like the typical writer narrative is that they were compelled to write stories to imitate this thing that they love, which is reading. Although I liked reading, it fit into a lot of other things I liked to do, like play sports and hang out with friends," he says. He didn't start "serious reading," he says, until he began taking creative writing classes in college at the University of Michigan. "In some ways," he says, "I got it all backwards."

As he was completing the final work on *Bluff City Pawn*, Schottenfeld got started on a couple of short stories. He plans another novel. "I'd like it to be about Rochester," he says. 



STREET SMARTS: Novelist Schottenfeld pounds the pavement like an investigative reporter to gather the material he reshapes into deeply researched, character-driven stories.