

# THE STARBOARD SEA

by Amber Dermont



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 ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



## *A Conversation with Amber Dermont*

*“We need to  
tell stories...  
to tell ourselves  
how to live.”*

The premise of your novel is seductive: an elite New England boarding school full of kids who are damaged goods, thrown out of other prep schools for one reason or another. Golden youth saddled with a shameful history. How did this idea come to you?

I grew up knowing aspects of this world, and it was always charged within my imagination. [Dermont attended Tabor Academy on the Massachusetts coast.] I myself was a very dedicated, serious student. But I was often friends with people who were risk-takers. Their imaginations really fascinated me: if you can create a misadventure for yourself... you create this great story and this fabulous memory. And where [people] get into trouble is when somebody gets hurt. One of the things I noticed was what small price people actually paid for their actions. It was a sad lesson to learn, but not everybody is punished for their misdeeds.

Jason, the young hero of your novel, is a morally compromised fellow. For one thing, we know he’s harboring a terrible secret connected to the suicide of his best friend Cal at his former prep school. We are in his mind throughout the book, and he starts off seeming like a good guy. But he also behaves badly —inciting acts of hazing, taking drugs. A black student he strikes up a friendship with tells him, “Jason, as much as I’d like to believe that we’re friends, I know I can’t count on you.” This shook me as a reader. Why did you create a central character whose integrity is called into doubt?

The easy route would have been to make him a hero, to make him this Great White Hope. And



that's dishonest. He is of this culture. He is of this privileged world and has all this unchecked privilege that he has abused. He has a kind of charm and grace, much of which comes from his friendship with Cal, his sailing partner and best friend who has killed himself. I am drawn to complex characters who do something horrible that they have shame about. Maybe their greatest punishment is that they have to live with themselves. One of the things that Jason has to come to terms with is that he is like his friends. He is like these bad kids in ways that are in his DNA, that he cannot run away from. He has to make a choice whether or not he wants to continue to be like them.

**Another tragedy befalls a girl Jason grows very close to at his new school. He unravels the mystery of what happened to her, but takes no action against those who are guilty. Why?**

That was a very hard choice to make as a writer. There's the idea that one of the reasons we biologically need to tell stories is we need to tell ourselves how to live. Most narratives in some way require a degree of comeuppance for the people who misbehave. We need to have these clear moral guides, and we need to know that we're on the right side of them. Again, I just felt that these kids wouldn't be punished. I know that through experience and also just through looking at our culture. A girl dies and nothing happens. She's easily forgotten. Her life doesn't have the same currency or value as these boys' lives.

*About the  
Author*

*“The film strip  
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**So the cards are stacked against individual heroic action?**

I want there to be a sense of hope and beauty in this world—and I hope it’s there. But the darkness of these characters’ lives is as real as any hope might be.

**You create a very vivid world in Bellingham. It’s not just a preppy school, but a school situated directly on the water where sailing plays a big part in the students’ lives. You write beautifully about the natural world and the ocean beyond the school. How did you keep this place alive in your mind as you wrote the story?**

Growing up by the water [on Cape Cod], water is always a tremendous source of inspiration for me. If you measure yourself against the ocean, you realize how small your life is. Most people spend their adult lives trying to recover from their childhoods and adolescences. I think people who have a happy time in high school are really lucky. I was pretty brutally damaged by my experiences in high school. I had a lot of friends, but I had a really, really tough time and it stayed with me.... I think it’s a good thing, ultimately. I’m grateful for the tough time I had. [Laughs.] It can really help you as a writer in understanding conflict. The world that I wrote about, the surface of it all, was something I grew up surrounded by. The film strip always running through my head is of that coastline, of the harbors and the sense of history connected to that: the maritime history, the literary history. All of that is always with me.



**Did you sail in school?**

Yes. Once I understood how important sailing was to Jason and Cal, I understood their relationship, the physical nature of it, and the sense of camaraderie and intimacy they would have. If you're on these little dinghies, your bodies have to be in complete unison. [You have to] balance between loving the risk of charging out into the water at incredible speeds versus being very safe and practical about how you harness the wind. me.

**Is it true that parts of your novel grew out of assignments you gave your creative writing students at Agnes Scott?**

Whenever I give any writing trigger to my students, I think it's important they see me do whatever it is they're going to do. If I give an in-class writing assignment, I have to do it too. I will read mine out loud to them. Mine is not always the best one in the class, and that's a lesson for them too. I think you have to be willing to make yourself vulnerable in that way to your students.

**What's your writing routine like? Do you write every day?**

I physically need to write. I have an emotional and intellectual compulsion to do it.... I tend to write at night and stay up really late. It's not especially good for one's health.

*About the  
Author*

*"I have an emotional and intellectual compulsion to [write]."*

Zadie Smith, the critic and acclaimed author of *White Teeth*, has said that there are some writers who go about painstakingly building a novel room by room, making sure the first room is meticulously decorated before they move on to constructing the next one. Others try to cobble together a whole book in one go, then return to straighten things out and put in the details. Where do you fall between these types?

I love the house metaphor. Writing is fairly intuitive. You learn to follow your writerly instincts, and you grope around in the dark for a pretty significant amount of time before you stumble on the ottoman and figure out where the light switch is. But eventually you do need to know what kind of house you're building. You need to know, "Am I building a mid-century modern ranch house? Am I building a Queen Anne?" You need to understand the architecture. I really love plot. I'm interested in action and agency, and having my characters do things, make mistakes and get caught. If you want to have any significant plot, you need to have a sense of structure.

Excerpted from an interview in *Arts Atlanta* magazine (ArtsATL.com) by Parul Kapur Hinzen © 2012



*An Original Essay  
by the Author*

**“A Daughter of Rare Books”**

One of the great good fortunes of my life is to have been born into a family of rare book dealers. Vacations were spent traveling around New England, visiting ancient red barns filled with lost literary treasure. We lived on Cape Cod and before heading to the beach on the Old King’s Highway, we’d stop by bookstores. During my childhood, I logged countless hours in pursuit of antiquities, breathing in the cinnamon scent of leather and watching my parents hunt. I’d stare at the strange assemblage of collectors and readers who seemed content to lean against wobbly shelves and browse. At one bookstore, I remember a particularly odd man with bushy hair. His skinny legs shooting out of his Bermuda shorts. My father caught me staring. “Do you know who that is?” he asked. I had no idea. I was eight years old. “That’s Kurt Vonnegut,” Dad said. “Remember that you saw him. Someday it will matter to you.”

It did matter to me. Early on, I learned to appreciate fine first editions, to fear foxing, to never chip a dust jacket or over-stress a spine. My parents trusted me and allowed me to examine their rare beauties: a handwritten manuscript by Wordsworth describing a walk in the Lake District, bank documents signed by Lord Byron, notes from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to his son, a letter by Charles Dickens telling his publisher farewell, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s resignation from his government post, an early typescript of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, the only extant copy of a play by Eugene O’Neill, fair copies of



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poems typed by William Carlos Williams, a letter from Wallace Stevens revealing that the poet did not like to write in the summer, love letters between Laura Riding and Robert Graves, a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* signed by Alice herself. One of my favorites was a first edition of Henry David Thoreau's first book, *A Week on The Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. His editors had neglected to make the changes Thoreau had requested and in the edition my parents owned, Thoreau had not only signed and inscribed the book but also made the corrections himself in his own steady surveyor's hand. I carried on a romance with these objects and was always a little heartbroken to be reminded that my parents ran a business. To see a letter written by Elizabeth Bishop sealed off for sale, to witness a first edition of *The Catcher in the Rye* delicately packaged or a crisp ten dollar bill signed by Amelia Earhart make its mysterious way out into the world made me weep.

Lucky for me, my parents are generous and sympathetic to my nostalgia. In my office, I have two framed original letters, reminders of the joys and responsibilities of being a writer. The first is a brief note typed on blue and white letterhead by John Cheever. There is one typo—the lyrical genius misspelled pleasantest, attempted to correct the misspelling, only to misspell the word again. The second letter, typed on thin grey paper is by Richard Connell, the author of the notorious tale “The Most Dangerous Game.” Connell's letter is addressed to a young boy named Ernest who has asked for advice on how to become a writer. It is a sweet, encouraging response to a fan's note but Connell does caution Ernest that writing “is not such an easy life.” He mentions the pain of storytelling, the difficulty of



coming up with ideas, and how hard it is to “dig new stories out of your mind.” What’s most important to Connell is that each story he writes “be different from any story ever written.”

Connell’s advice always reminds me of something John Cheever said. A young writer once asked him if he felt old-fashioned compared to the new brand of hip experimental writers. Cheever responded: “Every time I write a story it’s an experiment.” In many ways, the most dangerous and pleasantest game a writer can play is to experiment with plot, action, and character in the hopes of revealing something new about the human condition. Digging those stories out of one’s mind is not an easy life, but it can be rewarding.

As I began work on my novel *The Starboard Sea*, I wanted to honor the spirit of all the writers whose imaginations inform my own. I felt I owed those writers something and wanted to show them that I’d been paying attention. That after all those hours in red barns and bookstores I’d actually learned something. When the time came to give my main character Jason Prosper a favorite writer I heeded my father’s advice and remembered the things that should matter. I made sure that Jason smoked Pall Malls just like Kurt Vonnegut.

*In Her  
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## Recommended Reading

### ***Sailing Alone Around the World***

**Joshua Slocum**

Just like Jason and Cal, I still remember the summer I read Joshua Slocum's windswept tale of his three-year, 46,000 mile, solo circumnavigation. As a teenager, Slocum was constantly running away from home in search of adventure. Though he wouldn't attempt his solitary voyage until he was fifty, it's amazing to consider what Slocum achieved without GPS or chronometer, just dead reckoning to guide the way. His memoir is an epic of sea snakes, run-ins with whales, attacks by child pirates and periods of devastating loneliness. With the book's publication, Slocum became a celebrity but he never adjusted to life on land. He disappeared while sailing alone.

### ***The Motion of Light In Water***

**Samuel R. Delany**

Best known to fanboys and fangirls alike for his genius science fiction novels, including *Dhalgren*, *Babel-17*, and *The Einstein Intersection*, Samuel "Chip" R. Delany is in a class by himself. His memoir, *The Motion of Light In Water*, is a profound exploration of racial and sexual identity. Delany has lived more deeply than most of us and his work serves to illuminate how we all might become our better selves. When I read this book, I knew Chester would want to give a copy to Jason as gesture of friendship and understanding.



***And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life***

**Charles J. Shields**

First, read everything by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Then smoke a pack of Pall Malls in his honor and read this definitive biography of one of the most brilliant and maddening American minds. Shields captures Vonnegut's humor, his bravery, and his struggles with his singular imagination. And so it goes, and so we all aspire to become "unstuck" in time.

***Goats***

**Mark Jude Poirier**

Now a major motion picture starring David Duchovny and Vera Farmiga, this wholly original coming-of age novel stars a wealthy teenager named Ellis who lives a carefree life in Tucson, Arizona. With his *laissez-faire* New Age mother and his absent genius father, Ellis's only authority figure is a pot-smoking, pot-growing goat herder named, appropriately enough, Goat Man. When Ellis decides to leave the desert for a new life at an East Coast prep school, we follow his moving journey toward growth, enlightenment, and the search for the perfect high.

***Big Cats***

**Holiday Reinhorn**

Holiday Reinhorn is a comic genius. The short stories in *Big Cats* include some of the wildest and funniest portrayals of young women I have ever read. Many of the stories take place in the Pacific Northwest and California. Aidan would love this bold, soulful collection and would feel right at home among these dangerous, risk-taking West Coast dreamers.

*Keep on  
Reading*

*Sweetwater*

**Roxana Robinson**

This elegant novel set in New York City and the Adirondacks considers the challenges of widowhood, the pitfalls of second marriages, and the healing force of nature. It's exactly the type of story that Jason's mother would have enjoyed on a rainy summer's day at her cottage in Maine. Told with great emotional restraint, *Sweetwater* delves deeply into the difficult negotiations that hold families together.

*We The Animals*

**Justin Torres**

One of the most poetic novels I've ever read. *We The Animals* dares to ask harrowing questions about the reckless ways parents fail the children they love. The novel is at turns brutal and dazzling with defiant images of triumph and unforgettable moments of loss. This book will make you weep with longing and dream of a happier ending.

*Whip Smart*

**Melissa Febos**

Melissa Febos's journey from small town life in Cape Cod to life as a dominatrix in New York City is one of the most honest and soul-bearing memoirs I've ever encountered. Febos uncovers searing truths about voyeurism, power, and human desire. But perhaps her most daring accomplishment is that she is not afraid to indict the reader along the way. Funny and wise, this memoir is fearless.



***The Line of Beauty***  
**Alan Hollinghurst**

I didn't read this gorgeous novel until after I'd completed *The Starboard Sea*—a good thing because I probably would have been too awed by Hollinghurst's pitch-perfect evocation of the 1980s. *The Line of Beauty* is a grand story of politics, plague, art, unchecked privilege, and class warfare. Nick Guest is among the fictional characters I would most like to meet. My hope is that Nick would spin me around the dance floor just like he does with Margaret Thatcher in this novel's most memorable scene.

***The Complete Aubrey-Maturin Novels***  
**Patrick O'Brian**

There are twenty volumes in this series plus a posthumously published unfinished novel. Reading all of these books may sound like a heavy burden and commitment but trust me: you will be deeply entertained and find yourself quickly reeled into the high-stakes adventures of Captain Jack Aubrey and Dr. Stephen Maturin. In many ways, Jason and Cal's friendship is my tribute to O'Brian's unforgettable naval heroes. These are the finest novels ever written about life at sea.

*Keep on  
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## Reading Group Questions

1. From *The Catcher in the Rye* to *A Separate Peace*, *Prep*, and *Skippy Dies*, writers have often been drawn to the world of prep schools. What do you think attracts writers to the prep school setting? What attracts you as a reader? How is Bellingham Academy different from any other prep school you may have read about? Why do you think the author chose to set the novel in a school that caters to troubled teenagers?
2. Sailing plays a major role in the novel. Whether you are familiar or unfamiliar with the sailing terms how does Jason's sailing partnership with Cal help you to understand the closeness of their relationship? How do the language and nomenclature of sailing and celestial navigation serve as metaphors throughout the book?
3. The novel begins with a quotation from Captain John Paul Jones, "I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast for I intend to go in harm's way," and another quotation from a poem by Dan Chiasson, "You know/what you did. You know you know/what you did./No one is hearing your ornate confession." After reading the novel, how do these two epigraphs inform your understanding of the character of Jason Kilian Prosper? Why does Jason put himself in harm's way? Is the novel Jason's attempt at a confession and if so, how do you feel about his confession?
4. Aidan, Cal, and Jason all have questions about their own sense of attraction, their sexuality and desire. What do you think the author is attempting to say about the nature of human sexuality, especially among teenagers?



5. The characters in *The Starboard Sea* come from tremendous privilege and often squander or take for granted their privilege. Do you know people who are similar to the characters in this novel? Was it challenging for you to empathize with their troubles or did you recognize their teenaged vulnerability?
6. The novel is set in 1987 and there are important references to the Black Monday Stock Market Crash, Baby Jessica, and the Robert Chambers Preppie Murder Trial. Why do you think the author chose to set her novel in the past? Those of you who are familiar with this time period, how well did the author capture the late 1980s? Whether you are familiar or unfamiliar with this time period, how might this setting mirror the current cultural and economic landscape?
7. Throughout the novel, the author references several literary works, *O Pioneers!*, *The Awakening*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *The Motion of Light In Water*. Many of these books are often read in high school. Why do you think the author references these works in particular? How do these books resonate within the lives of the characters?
8. What did you think of the adults in the novel? Are any of them suitable role models for their children or their students?
9. Both Chester Baldwin and Yazid Yazid face different forms of prejudice. How does the novel handle issues of race, racism, and bullying?

*Keep on  
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