



ALAN HOWARD, *In the Land of Eternal Spring*

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Peace Corps volunteer Laura Jenson has a lot in common with Peter Franklin, a Fulbright Scholar whom she meets in Guatemala City in 1963. Both of them are inspired by JFK's call to action for a new foreign policy that would help the poor and promote democracy. What they find, however, is the reality of America's one dimensional Cold War policies that got us into Vietnam and radicalized a generation. They fall in love as Laura becomes involved in Guatemala's nascent revolutionary movement. As the political situation in Guatemala erupts, Laura draws Peter into also supporting the revolutionary movement, and they begin working together clandestinely in the city and mountains. The tension builds as the government's security forces close in on them and then trap them in a safe house.

Q. You were born and raised in Boston, but at age 15, you and your family moved to Puerto Rico and lived there for two years. Can you tell us about that experience and how it may have shaped your future interests?

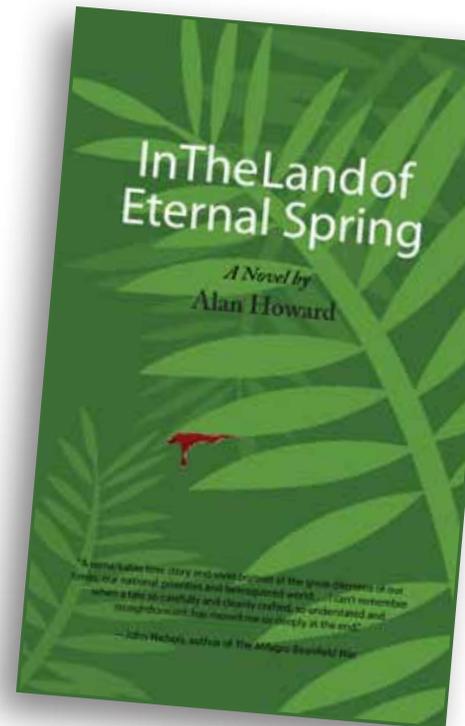
ALAN HOWARD Learning another language, in this case Spanish, at an age when it isn't hard to become fluent, gave me access to another culture and continent and sparked my curiosity about other people and places. This immersion in societies unlike the one you were born into can have a deeply humanizing effect on a person, at least it did on me: identifying with the entire species instead of any number of its subdivisions constructed along familial, national, religious or whatever lines that happen to appeal to you. It opened me to the world. Without those two years in Puerto Rico, I believe I would have become a very different person and lived a very different life.

Q. Your early college education began with you (reluctantly) accepting a football scholarship to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. Can you tell us about your path from that point to finally earning a B.A. in Economics at Hamilton College? When did you realize you wanted to become a writer?

AH I've never wanted to become a writer any more than a drunk wants to become an alcoholic. I can think of many more socially useful and personally rewarding occupations.

When I was much younger, I envisioned my life taking shape the way Saul Bellow describes it in the opening of *The Adventures of Augie March* ... "and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles."

After a knee injury prematurely ended my college football career early in my first year at Annapolis, I came face to face with an academic program of math, science and engineering courses to prepare me for the life of a naval officer, which was one of the last things I had in mind, though, curiously, I did take more than I thought I would to the military life of



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the academy, the marching, uniforms and camaraderie, the power of firearms, but it wasn't enough to keep me there. When I finally figured out how to escape Annapolis and get myself an honorable discharge from the U.S. Navy, I looked for a school that seemed as different from Annapolis as any I could find and decided that was Hamilton.

But during that unhappy year at Annapolis there was a required English course I initially found almost as boring as all my other classes. Then one day something happened. We had been assigned to read a story by Scott Fitzgerald, whom I had never heard of, nor can I tell you today the name of the story. I had no idea how to describe it at the time, but it was the moment I first heard what I came to understand was the music of prose. That moment lodged in one of the 100 trillion synapses of my brain and began its life-long work of infiltrating the deepest recesses of my consciousness.

At Hamilton I began the practice of keeping a journal, continued to this day. Toward the end of my junior year I was surprised to learn that I had won an essay prize, surprised because I never knew the prize existed and hadn't entered my work into the competition. I learned later that one of my professors had submitted it. I realized then not that I wanted to become a writer-- but that I had a modest talent with the English language and could maybe make a modest living from it until something better came along.

Q. Like your narrator Peter Franklin, you were a Fulbright Scholar who traveled to Guatemala in the tumultuous early 60s. During that time, you wrote a *New York Times Magazine* article that shed light on our government's fledgling literacy program there. Was this the experience that triggered your idea for *In the Land of Eternal Spring* and would you say your novel is semi-autobiographical?

AH Yes and yes, but with caveats. It is one of the worst kept secrets of the literary arts and

publishing industry that most memoirs are full of lies and most novels, particularly those with first-person narrators, are based on one aspect or another of the author's own experiences. Since I was in Guatemala during this time period, I won't object to anyone calling it semi-autobiographical, which in itself is a kind of wimp-out from the more robust autobiographical. But even here I urge caution. I recently heard from a journalist acquaintance who had spent a couple of years in Guatemala in the early 1960s as a Peace Corps Volunteer and had read an advanced copy of *In the Land of Eternal Spring*. He thought it was good, he said, "though some parts were a bit uncomfortable personally." I didn't know quite what to make of that. The first thing that came to mind was the sex. I didn't know him well and thought maybe some of the sex was a little too graphic for him, though by today's standards I think it's fairly mild.

He explained. He felt guilty having lived in the Guatemalan Highlands for two years without having been able to penetrate the lives of the villagers there, this protective shell they had created against wave after wave of conquering foreigners and how much he regretted his never encountering the evil and excitement described by the narrator in the book. I reminded him that this was fiction and that the facts of my own personal experience in Guatemala were not at all unlike his own, so he shouldn't feel so guilty—but should still flog the book!

Q. After you returned from Guatemala, you were admitted into Columbia University's International Fellowship program and studied



Photo: George Cavalletto



for a graduate degree at the School of Journalism. What made you decide to leave?

AH Another assignment from *The New York Times Magazine*, this one to write about the revolutionary guerrilla movement in Guatemala (aha, another big dose of the autobiographical!). I worked it out with Columbia to go over Christmas Break and return to class not long after the start of second semester. It took me about a month longer to get back than I thought it would, and Columbia wouldn't let me complete the semester. They offered to let me come back for the second semester of the following year. I figured that two *New York Times Magazine* pieces under my belt would be worth at least as much as a second semester at Columbia and never regretted the decision. But I was touched by many of my classmates protesting the decision not to let me return that year. The *Times* article came out right about the time I would have been graduating, so I've always thought of it as my own special MA.

Q. You've written numerous articles and essays for *The New York Times Magazine*, the *Nation*, *Dissent*, and you were also a long-time Latin American correspondent for Liberation News Service in the 1960s and 70s. In 1974 you wrote a Public Television documentary after Allende was overthrown in Chile. Was it difficult to make the transition from print and broadcast journalism to fiction writing?

AH Well, there are people who would say that a lot of my journalism is fiction. For example, that PBS documentary on Allende was scheduled to debut on Channel 13 in New York and then air on PBS stations across the country. It did air as scheduled on Ch. 13, but a few days later it was pulled from all the other PBS stations with an explanation that "it made Allende sound like the Second Coming." I thought that was pretty good. As for the transition to fiction, there was none to make. I've been writing fiction almost as

long as non-fiction. What I haven't been doing is publishing fiction.

Q. What kind of reader were you as a child? Were there any books you read then, or since that have particularly inspired you? Who are your favorite writers now?

AH I never read as a child at home and nothing I read in school—from kindergarten through high school—that I would call memorable. As for books that have particularly inspired me once I began reading seriously, my goodness, where to begin? I did mention Fitzgerald and Bellow above, and they would certainly be on such a list. I'll have to take a look at the bookshelves here in my office. I've often thought of these shelves as an extension of my brain since I knew so much of what I read would be lost without such a physical repository.

Ok, here goes, alphabetically, and trying as hard as I can, without comment; but just to say this suspicious list (only two women?) excludes writers who have produced a tremendous book, classics really, but what I've read of the rest of their work didn't rise to the same level for me, like Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?*

The roll call please:

Agee, Algren, Auster, Baldwin, Camus, Dostoevsky, Durrell, Greene, Hemingway, Joyce, Lawrence, McCullers, Mailer, Mann, Orwell, Roth, Styron, Tolstoy, Twain, Updike, Welty and Wolfe (Thomas). I regret to say that these are also my favorite writers now and reflect an obvious problem. Only Auster and Roth are still alive and Roth says he isn't writing any more (though I don't believe him). I have to intensify my efforts to read more of our many talented writers working today.

Q. For many years, you were a political activist, who championed and wrote about various causes from the anti-war movement to Civil Rights to President Clinton's anti-sweatshop initiative. You





also were a devoted volunteer for both of Barack Obama’s Presidential campaigns in 2008 and 2012. Where does this passion for social justice and politics come from, and do you still consider yourself an activist?

AH I acquired the political activist bug about the same time I acquired the writing bug (that prize-winning essay I wrote at Hamilton in 1961 was about the civil rights movement) and still consider myself an activist. I don’t know where it comes from any more than I know where the writing bug comes from. Neither runs in the family. For much of my working life the two have maintained a symbiotic relationship. I was only 24 when I published that article in *The New York Times Magazine* about the literacy program in Guatemala. I had gone there pretty much with a politically open mind. I am actually baffled how anyone still in touch with his or her own humanity could *not* become a political activist today. Actually, I’m not baffled, but that’s a much longer conversation than we have the space for here.

Q. Like Donald Trump, Guatemala’s recently elected President, Jimmy Morales, had never run for political office before and was best known as a television character. Do you have any insights into this coincidence?

AH Other than that they are both products of dysfunctional political systems and societies suffering from terrible inequalities of wealth, I don’t. But you just gave me an idea for what could be a very interesting magazine piece. Do we still have magazines?

Q. Can you talk about your writing process, and share what you are working on now?

Before I respond to the first part of your question, I have an embarrassing admission to make. After I published the 1966 *Times* piece on the revolutionary movement in Guatemala, I declined an offer from a big publisher to write a book on the subject, because, among other reasons, “I wondered if such a story could not best be told in fiction,” as I sagely wrote to the president of this publishing house himself. That was the beginning of *In the Land of Eternal Spring*. So I hesitate to describe a writing process that took 50 years to produce a 305-page debut novel for fear of becoming an object of ridicule, or even worse, pity. Though in my defense I did have to deal with work assignments that, for example, over the past 15 years took me to China two or three times a year to deal with and write about labor rights there. Anyway, I doubt anyone would learn anything from a description of my writing process they didn’t already know. The good news is that I have fixed the problems that delayed for so long the completion of this book. The bad news is that there are always problems you haven’t seen before.

I am working on another novel now that I would like to believe is pretty far along. Its protagonist is an employee of the New York City Department of Investigation in the 1990s who comes across a case that turns his life upside down. Donald Trump appears briefly and is not nice.

It will be a great novel. Trust me.



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