

Asheville's Rob Neufeld on Nick Flynn and other noted authors speaking at WCU's Spring Festival

Nick Flynn, one of the most inventive, deep and personal memoirists writing today, is coming to Cullowhee.

Flynn is the author of the award-winning book — the title of which, expletive deleted, is “Another ... Night in Suck City,” about his homeless father. In his latest memoir, “The Ticking Is the Bomb,” Flynn finds hope after a thoroughly pessimistic start.

“This black and white photograph in my hand is an image of my unborn daughter,” Flynn begins his book, referring to an ultrasound sonogram taken of his wife’s womb in 2007.

At the same time, he’s dwelling on other photos, those of tortured Abu Ghraib prisoners. He has been called to be a witness to their testimony at an international hearing.

One day, he hopes to tell his daughter the story: “We got lost for a while, but then we found our way.”

Flynn is one of 13 authors — along with Ron Rash, Stefan Block and others — giving public programs at Western Carolina University’s Spring Literary Festival, today through Thursday. Flynn concludes the festival with a Thursday night talk. For the full schedule, go to www.litfestal.org.

Rabbit holes

Flynn’s memoirs take the form of linked meditations, drawing you in with anecdotes. The anecdotes sound like fables, and the fables express philosophy.

In “Ticking,” he tells about the time in 2002 when he was living in Rome on a grant, writing the book about his father.

“At one point,” he noted, “I laid each chapter out on the terrazzo floor, eighty-three in all, arranged them like the map of an imaginary city” with piles of paper forming buildings and neighborhoods.

“In this way I could get a sense if one could

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find their way through the book, if the map I was creating made sense, if it was a place one would want to spend some time in. If one could wander there, if one could get lost.”

The current book involves the same strategy, with the “city” seeming four-dimensional. Chapter 91 out of 94, for example, starts off with a reflection about the 1972 film “Solaris,” in which a ghost inhabits a space capsule (one of many references to movies, books, and news).

Flynn then turns toward the insight, “A year after Lulu is born I learn that ‘Abu Ghraib’ translates in Arabic to ‘House of Strange Fathers’ — maybe this is the key, maybe it’s as simple as that, the reason I felt compelled to wrestle these shadows.”

Flynn’s grandfather was dying; his homeless father was doddering. And Flynn “was on the threshold,” he says, “of becoming a father myself.”

Story of O

There is no depth that Flynn won’t explore. In his not-writing life, swimming in lakes is his fearless activity.

In the chapter titled, “story of o,” Flynn reflects on the sadomasochistic novel that became a French sensation in 1954 and an American one in 1965.

“A woman obliterates herself, or allows herself to be obliterated for the love of a man,” Flynn summarizes. Then he writes:

“Here’s something I try not to think about much: In the body of her suicide note, on the second or third page, my mother described herself as “a real ‘Story of O.’”

It gets much deeper than that even in that one chapter. Sometimes, it gets into politics — the failure of torture leading to the Iraq War; the danger of resoluteness.

Pessimism and the humanities

One of the marks of a great writer is that he or she is familiar with the dark side. This does not mean the threat of evil.

It means pessimism, which comes with diving into underworlds, from which one rebounds.

There’s a difference between the Literary Festival and SXSW. Techno-utopia is a sunny field with many concession stands.

The humanities are side paths with their own kinds of thrills.

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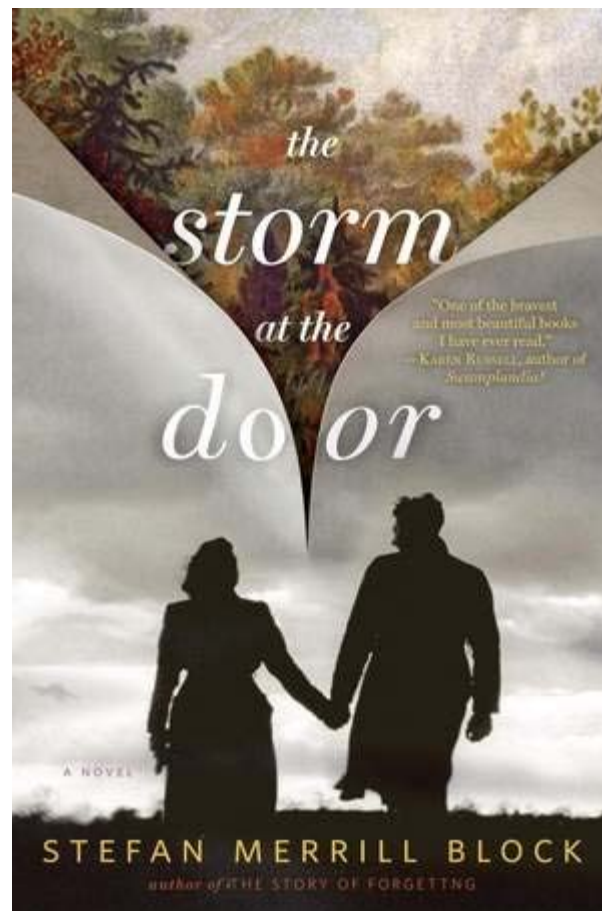
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“Proteus lives at the bottom of a steep cliff, down a treacherous path, at the edge of the sea,” Flynn begins Chapter 11. “You’ve been told he has the answer to your question, and you are a little desperate to have this question answered.”

You get your arms around Proteus’ neck. You know he will transform into terrifying shapes in order to dislodge you. “But the promise is that if you hold on, through your fear, he will return to his real form and answer your question.”

“The Ticking Is the Bomb” may spend too much time on the shadow side for some, but the writing is so exquisitely gentle and thoughtful.



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Another standout: Stefan Block

Stefan Block, another extraordinary writer, is coming to the festival, too. His first novel, "The Story of Forgetting," was an international best-seller and won the Texas Book Award. It follows the path of Alzheimer's disease through Block's mother's family.

"I was terrified, of course," Block says of his exploration, "but I also felt something else, something overwhelming and dazzling in the absolute power of history."

The voice of a young man with an afflicted mother includes scientific research. The voice of an old man includes tales about a fantasy world, Isidora — a land without memory — a narrative inheritance that Seth's mother shares.

Block's new novel, "The Storm at the Door," follows a mentally injured World War II vet into The Mayflower Home for the Mentally Ill. He reconstructs and navigates his life with imagination, as do the other patients; as does his wife, who must deal with losing him.

SPRING LITERARY FESTIVAL **Block** speaks at 7:30 p.m. Monday in the UC Theatre, University Center, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee.

Nick Flynn speaks there at 7:30 p.m. Thursday.

The other evening speakers are: poet **Glenis**

Redmond, today; **Ron Rash**, Tuesday; and novelist

Daniel Woodrell, Wednesday.

Find the schedule at www.litfestival.org or call 227-7264.

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