

1. Tell me a little bit about beginning to write *The End of Good Intentions*...

Several years ago, I wrote “Flight,” the story that became the first chapter of the novel. I always felt that, even though Eivar’s story was over, the larger story hadn’t been fully explored. That there was something more to say. A couple of years later, I retired from teaching at Reedley College, and I was feeling a little desperate—I didn’t want to waste the luxury of all this newfound time—and that’s when I looked at “Flight” again. Originally, I thought that each chapter would introduce a new character who would pick up the narrative and move on from there—Eivar introduces Elisa, Elisa introduces Michael, and so on, in a pretty straightforward, linear way—but then Michael and his first-person voice took over in chapter three with all of his backstory, and I knew I’d have to come back to him.

Current events also played a role; when I wrote “Flight” (later renamed for use in the novel as “You’ve Arrived at Your Destination”), I was aware of the forest fires and the smoke that have plagued the West Coast in the last fifteen-plus years, but by the time I finished writing the first draft of the novel at the end of 2020, we were all too aware of the effects of climate change and the fires, which were no longer confined to inaccessible areas of the mountains but were now roaring toward and through our own communities. Of course, by that time, we had also become much too aware of the fractures within our political discourse, a fracture that has been aided and abetted by many of the leaders of the Evangelical movement, those who claim a moral high ground but support politicians whose own lives are sadly lacking in principle.

2. You said that you retired from teaching. How did that affect your writing life? How has life in retirement differed from your life as a college instructor?

The easy answer is time. After I retired in 2019, I was no longer driving a little more than hour round-trip to go to and from work. I wasn’t grading papers or preparing lectures and assignments. Or, heaven help me, sitting in meetings. I had my own time and the inclination to stare at the screen and (in the words that Philip Roth gives to E.I. Lonoff in *The Ghost Writer*) “turn sentences around.” The downside to retirement is losing the stimulation of colleagues and students and the discipline of reading to prepare for a class. Still, how’s this for a comparison? I was able to publish two books during the course of thirty-six years of teaching (*Hints of His Mortality* and *The Island*) whereas in a little more than four years of retirement, I’ve been able to put together three books: the story collection, *A Longing for Impossible Things* (Johns Hopkins UP) in 2022, *The End of Good Intentions* (Fomite Press, 2023), and another story collection, *The Bliss of Your Attention* (JHUP, forthcoming in 2025).

3. How did you get interested in religion as a subject for fiction?

Ever since college, I've been fascinated by the role that a particular community plays in an individual's life, for good as well as for ill. Churches, bars, bowling leagues, service organizations—no matter what kind of group you might be talking about, that group will always exert some influence upon an individual's life. That influence might be benign, but it must be acknowledged, even if it's as unimportant as the way in which one's weekly schedule is organized; however, some groups—and all-too many of them are religious and utopian in nature—extract a heavy price for membership, and in many cases, that price might be both the individual's decision-making powers as well as the individual's life. Think of the past fifty years: The People's Temple, the Branch Davidians, Heaven's Gate, just to name three. In my twenties, I became acutely aware of how easily I was influenced by the opinions and beliefs of others. Now, many (many, many) years later, I'm aware of (and wary about) how easily that influence-of-others might be reestablished.



4. Looking back at the novel, is there anything you might have changed?

That's a little bit of a loaded question, a little bit like asking in a job interview, "What are your weaknesses?" and expecting an answer that is more than disingenuous. But I do have an answer, and I think it's honest (maybe I'm just a creature of Evangelical guilt, after all): I wish that at least one of the characters might have exhibited a stronger and more substantial spiritual life, rather than just a life constrained by religious mores and values and superstitious ritual. The one character who might have laid claim to that role is Emily, but she dies entirely off-stage and with little to no acknowledgement by the other characters. That said, I don't know that Emily would be any easier to live with than Brother Carl or others of his ilk. Maybe the other character who has something of more substance, besides Michael's brief college girlfriend, would be DDP, but his Road to Damascus moment almost gets played more for comedy than real revelation. All of which may say more about me and my own relationship to faith than anything else...