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10 QUESTIONS WITH CHANELLE BENZ

hoopla digital: *The Gone Dead* is your debut novel, though you already have a celebrated short story collection under your belt. When did you start writing *The Gone Dead* and how was the experience of switching to the longer medium?

Chanelle Benz: I started writing the novel in 2013 and I absolutely did struggle for quite a while with the form. One of the things that delights me about writing short stories is how quickly I can write a skeleton draft and see what I've got. Even if I end up cutting it in half or changing the ending or protagonist, I can chart where the energy of the story wants to go, which is typically never what I first intended. But the novel asks me to slow down and flesh out the spaces where I usually leap ahead to action, which initially made me fret about being boring and go back over the fifty or so pages for a year or two. I have a sense of almost mechanistic completeness when I finish a short story, but for me the novel can have many arcs and movements and so its shape can be far more orchestral.

hd: What were the most satisfying parts of this novel to write? Which chapters or passages were challenging to complete?

CB: It felt good to write from the perspective of the more morally dubious characters because I got to play with the stories that people tell themselves about their past in order to fit their idea of who they are today. Everyone is continually revising their past, but while some people are trying to get closer to the truth, these characters are disposing of it. I also loved writing the most climactic scene in the novel because I like to sit in that charged place and play out the different ways it could turn out.

The characters of Carlotta and Dr. Hurley were a challenge to write because while bringing their very different voices into being is one of things I like to do best, it took me a while to develop their interiority. I didn't want them to merely be props for the main protagonist.

hd: Your novel has received several glowing reviews as an exciting and worthy addition to the canon of the Southern Novel. What is your relationship to the South and its literature? Why was it important to set your novel there?

CB: It is odd to find that I have written a Southern Novel (with capitalized letters) because I'm not from the South. I'm not actually from any one place, but the South, the Mississippi Delta in particular, stirs me deeply. There are some places you go and can feel that what happened there is still there and is not finished. In the Delta, you can trace this in many of the still-standing buildings, who owns what, the rivers, the graveyards, the monuments that exist and the ones that don't.

I ended up exploring the Delta while I was living briefly in Hattiesburg and starting reading about its history and specifically about Mississippi civil-rights-era cold cases. The stories of these cases haunted and enraged me, but they also brought me into contact with other voices—Fannie Lou Hamer, James Meredith, Son House, Ross Barnett—and made me ask like Eudora Welty: Where are these voices coming from? When I think of the Delta I think of the way that people speak, the stories they tell, the songs they sing, the prayers and protests across time. I wanted to write about an injustice that most people have forgotten or never had to know, except for those who carry it now.



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hd: Billie's father was a fictional groundbreaking African-American poet. Which real-life POC authors have most inspired and informed your development as a writer?

CB: Kazuo Ishiguro, Roberto Bolaño, Natalie Diaz, Marlon James, Robert Hayden, Kiese Laymon, and one of my mentors, Arthur Flowers.

hd: When describing your book to others, we have alternately called it a family saga, a slow-burn thriller, and literary fiction, which perhaps could all be right. Did you set out to write a thriller? How do you describe your book?

CB: I didn't! I knew that I wanted the novel to have a mystery at its heart as much as a book by Patrick Modiano or Rivka Galchen or Roberto Bolaño might do. I think this is because I am after the lost story. I also come from the theatre and feel compelled to never lose the audience. I know what it's like to feel people walk out. But spectacle is not necessarily the answer; people stay in the room because they have questions, because there's something between the actor/audience or book/reader that can only happen then and there—I guess I'm after that too.

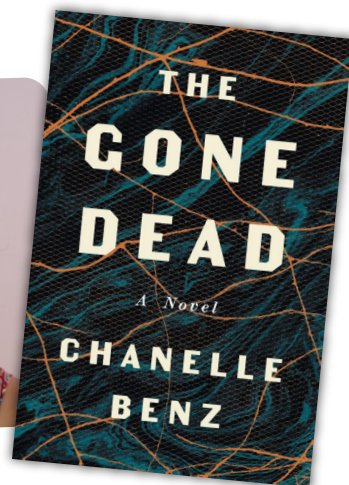
I think of the book as a stranger returns home where she tries to figure out the true circumstances of her father's death and her own involvement—so there is a mystery, family inheritance, an intersection of race and history, literary play. I'm not sure I do a very good job describing it!

hd: Talk about your research for the novel. What fiction or non-fiction sources were most influential in developing this story?

CB: I spent a lot of time online reading what bits and pieces I could about civil-rights-era cold cases in Mississippi. Work by the journalists Stanley Nelson, David Rigden, Jerry Mitchell, and Ben Greenman were invaluable, though I did not discover David Rigden's amazing podcast *Someone Knows Something* where in season 3 he retraces his work on a civil-rights-era cold case with Thomas Moore until late in the game. I also read memoirs by folks like James Meredith, Endesha Ida Mae Holland, Anne Moody, and Charles Evers. I read tons on Emmett Till, waded through *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, and sped through Richard Grant's *Dispatches from Pluto*.

hd: Where did the idea of Billie start for you and can you share a little about her development as a character? Do you view her as a tragic character?

CB: It always began with her, though she was probably the character it took the longest to develop. I wanted her to be an outsider but with an intimate connection to the place. I don't think she really started to be fully realized until the other voices took shape and could tell me about her, could name the past that shaped her which she couldn't know. I don't see Billie as tragic because I hope that her story isn't just about loss but a kind of opening and expansion.



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hd: Keeping the suspense tightly wound until just the right moment is certainly a balance in any book. Discuss the slow burn you've created, and how you went about plotting your timeline for unraveling the secrets.

CB: I followed something one of my teachers, Arthur Flowers, said, which was that each section should set up or complicate a question while also answering another. I also tried to imbue the narrative with one of the scariest things about being somewhere unknown alone which is not being able to tell what is really something to fear and what is just your imagination.

hd: This novel and its themes seem to be particularly important in our current cultural moment. What do you hope your readers take away from *The Gone Dead*?

CB: That the darker parts of our history and our hurts are shared, and that we do ourselves a disservice to silence or omit these narratives. We're all shaped by the past that came before us—institutionally, emotionally, genetically—and any sort of freedom comes from bringing it to light.

hd: The novel raises the issue of justice and what it can look like when facing complex, intergenerational traumas that touch not only individuals but an entire community in some way. What drew you to address this in your novel?

CB: Those civil-rights-era cold cases, which are of course part of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. I think we are starting to better understand and accept that intergenerational trauma is a real thing and very much alive for black folks in this country.

