

Wilson's Dublin roots influence themes of home, heritage in debut novel
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By CLAY REYNOLDS

Shane Wilson admits that Wasser, the fictional town that's the setting of his new novel "A Year Since the Rain," is unintentionally based on Dublin. A 2003 graduate of West Laurens High School, Wilson lived in Laurens County for most of his life before becoming a college English teacher, and now, a published author.

While he didn't use Dublin as any basis for the town he created in the book, characteristics of the place he grew up and lived for much of his life inevitably showed up in its personality.

"This town is embedded in me," Wilson said. "It's in my DNA. So whenever I start writing about towns, I write about the dynamics of this place... Writing Wasser as Dublin is a way for me to immortalize that part of my life."

The book, which studies the meaning of one's heritage, indirectly explores parts of Wilson's own relationship with his hometown. He explained as much last Thursday evening during a stop on his mini-book tour - an event at My CoffeeShop downtown in which he discussed the book and read passages from it before a small audience of fans and friends.

"I'm a big believer in origins," he said. "I think that where we start has a lot to do with where we end up, even if you try to fight it. You're a product of where you're coming from."

"A Year Since the Rain" was released last month through Snow Leopard Publishing. It's Wilson's first novel, although he has previously published several works of poetry in anthologies and literary periodicals.

The book, in fact, was originally supposed to be a poem.

"I think I was really halfway through it before I realized I was even writing a novel," Wilson said. "I started writing this poem called 'A Year Since the Rain,' and it was awful. Pages and pages of terrible poetry. I put it on the shelf, came back a year later and wrote what would become the first sentence of the book, and it kept flowing and flowing. For a long time I thought it would be just a short story, then I was 35,000 words into it and it kind of kept going."

Three years later, he completed and published the novel, which hit bookshelves March 17.

"I almost want to believe all novels start by accident," he said.

He calls the novel a work of "magical realism," which is a genre pioneered by authors like Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie that typically creates realistic characters then bombards them with the strange and bizarre.

"After you've grounded the reader in a very real place then you can start throwing interesting, surreal and paranormal things at the reader and see how they react to those things," Wilson said. "It enables you to see what realistic people do in really weird situations. That gives us an opportunity to explore deeper facets of humanity instead of just sending (the characters) to work every day."

"A Year Since the Rain" follows a character named Alan, a dejected computer programmer who sees his hometown succumb to a prolonged drought that causes it to literally disintegrate and a massive sinkhole that threatens to swallow it up. This forces him on a "journey of self-discovery" in which several mystical characters help him redefine his sense of belonging allowing him to move on to someplace different from the one he's known his entire life.

Alan's story, Wilson says, borrows from certain aspects of his own.

Wilson lived in Dublin for most of his childhood. His family moved to Georgia from Alabama when he was three years old, and has lived at their home between Dublin and Dudley ever since. After graduating high school, he did two years of undergrad at what was then Middle Georgia College in Cochran before transferring to Valdosta State, where he'd earn both his bachelor's and master's degrees.

He taught English at Darton College in Albany and the former Georgia Perimeter College in Covington before moving to Fayetteville, N.C., where he currently teaches developmental writing at Fayetteville Technical Community College.

Having moved away from and back to Dublin several times since high school, Wilson has experienced both the small town sickness many after spending years in their hometown and the urge to come back after being gone for a long time. His feeling of being caught between a reluctance to leave home and a fear of staying is one that's not uncommon to young adults in college and early-career stages of life. A similar struggle is central to the development of his main character, whose idea of home solely as familiar geography is challenged throughout the story.

"The book explores that idea that sometimes we put roots down in places and

sometimes we put roots down in people," Wilson said.

As a younger person, it was all Wilson could do to get away from Dublin. But he began to feel an attachment to the town and its people that became part of him when he returned as an adult.

Coming back home, as he did to spend last weekend, is a nostalgic experience that often involves eating dinner with old friends and taking a ride around town to see what's changed and what's still the same. Among the audience at Thursday's book reading were several of Wilson's old English teachers and his parents, who still call Laurens County home.

Spending time at many of his old hangouts and catching up with friends from high school who are still around always reminds him of how this really is his first home, even though he's moved away.

"As long as I've been in Georgia I've felt connected to Dublin," Wilson said. "There's something about Dublin and that kind of town that always kind of draws you back."

In the early going, the book's reception has been positive. It had one of the most successful pre-order periods of any the publisher has seen. Wilson has also heard good things from friends and colleagues that have already made it through the novel.

"People who've talked to me have enjoyed it," he said.

What's the next step in his authorial career? Wilson plans on publishing a second novel that's unrelated to his first. In fact, he's already halfway finished writing it. At the same time, he also plans to put together a collection of short stories based on the world of "A Year Since the Rain" that will be something of a prequel to the novel. Using the same story world, it will visit on additional characteristics of the town and some of the characters who didn't get a large amount of face time.

You can find out more about "A Year Since the Rain" and Wilson's other published work at his website: shanewilsonauthor.com. The new novel is available for purchase at snowleopardpublishing.com.