

## Stefan Merrill Block debuts *The Story of Forgetting*

**A** MOUNTAIN OF CREATIVITY, a motivational tug from an ex-girlfriend, and some wishful Googling led to 27-year-old Plano Senior High School alumnus **Stefan Merrill Block's** discovery. "Discovery" because reading his debut novel *The Story of Forgetting* is like striking gold, not to mention, the book is a finalist for the American Booksellers Association's 2009 Indies Choice Book Award for Best Author Discovery. Since Random House picked up this heartfelt novel on familial Alzheimer's disease, Block has received national media attention from *People*, National Public Radio, and *The New York Times*.

In the two years it took to write the novel—which partially takes place in a town modeled after Plano—Block devised 1,500 pages of what he called a "mess." "I knew I needed help," he said, forming a shy grin as a wave of humility pulled at his posture.

"It's important to fail many times before you succeed at something. That may be too much of a sand-castle belief—brush it all away and begin again—but that's how you learn."

Block's ex-girlfriend, who was supporting him some financially, told him he owed it to her and himself to do something with his 1,500 pages of incubating words. "She said I needed an agent. So, I decided to bite the bullet, and I Googled the name of authors whose books I just read and *agent*, and this guy's name kept coming up again and again."

That guy is Bill Clegg of the William Morris Agency in New York City. William Morris is one of the largest, most well-known agencies in the world.

"I mailed the manuscript to him and all he said in an e-mail

[back] was 'I'm reading it and I'm smiling big.' I was so stunned, I did four victory laps around the neighborhood," Block said and laughed. "He called me to his office for what I thought was an interview, so I went dressed like an author should dress—tweeds and corduroys."

Then he paused as if to reveal a heavy secret: "William Morris in New York City is like God, Inc. It's this massive tower of steel and glass...it's all very intimidating. I went into his office shaking, I was so afraid I was going to blow it."

Bill Clegg immediately pulled out Block's manuscript and together, the two dissected it. What Block thought was going to be a short interview was a "nauseating" six-hour meeting. "The interview was done for him," said Block. "I didn't understand that but he'd already agreed to be my agent!"

A polished manuscript was sent to publishers for bids. Interestingly, in the final auction, the highest bidder didn't win. It is up to the author to decide what publishing house he or she wants, and in Block's case, he chose Random House. "I just had a real connection with my editor David Ebershoff," he said. "He was editing Norman Mailer, Charles Bock, and David Mitchell, and he's a great novelist himself. He just published a book called *The 19th Wife*."

While relaying the story of how Block got from being a PSHS student working as the editor of his school newspaper to a national author, he appears to be genuinely shocked. "It's not like I didn't know that writing could be a career, but it seemed unrealistic," he admits. "It all sounds so naive, and now that I understand how publishing works, I think it's an unusual story."

Perhaps it takes an unusual story to write an unusual book, a book that will jump out to editors at Random House, a book that will appeal to teenagers as much as it will older adults, a book that explores a disease that affects 5.3 million Americans every day. Certainly, a story set in a town loosely modeled after Plano is appealing!

Said Block, "It is based on the Plano I lived in when I was a kid. It more closely resembles communities north of Plano—this juxtaposition of old farmhouses and farmland with this ultra-modern city that's unfurling at rapid speed...these grids of McMansions that are crowding out the old farmhouses...that sense of hyper-newness...a razing of the past to make way for this new place."

And, isn't that symbolic of Alzheimer's? The *razing of the past to make way for this new place*, a new state of mind? And what of this state of mind? Is it better to forget certain things at certain times? Said Block, "The book's theme revolves around the potential of bliss in the oblivion of forgetfulness."

*The Story of Forgetting* opens with a lonely, 68-year-old hunchback named Abel Haggard who is haunting the remnants of his family's farm, only to be haunted by the memories of those he's lost. Then there's the 15-year-old, acne-prone science nerd named Seth Waller who's on a mission to trace the history of his mother's genetic disorder. "These two characters don't know of each other's existence, but the reader can see that they share a duel legacy," said Block. "One, they both have dealt with the loss of loved ones through this rare genetic disorder (an early onset form of Alzheimer's



Author **Stefan Merrill Block**. Profile photo

disease); the other is that both, as children, were told the story of this imaginary world—a land called Isidora.”

Isidora. A mysterious and fantastical imaginary world where people can't hold onto any memory, even the memory of death. According to the tale, “you will know that you are almost to Isidora when you come to a sprawling field and you are suddenly seized by the sense that you're standing upon the threshold of eternity.”

The legendary tales of Isidora are based on stories that the author's mother and grandmother told him as a child. In fact, the entire novel is an elegy to Block's childhood. “It's a collection of all the things I've loved, feared and hoped for as a kid,” he said. “It's about family, love, loss. Alzheimer's is only there as a context.”

**B**lock's grandmother had Alzheimer's when he was around 10 years old. “I was really close with her,” he said. “She lived with us when she was descending into it. There's this awful role reversal that I describe in the book that is emblazoned in my psyche, where I had seen her as one of my caretakers and as this very maternal figure, and in a very short time, the role totally reversed. It's an awful thing to watch someone you've known lose their sense of self and their memory of you. It's awful for the family,” he continued, “but for the person, he or she loses time. Time is what makes us an adult but when you lose your sense of time, you return to living in the moment. I find hope in that.”

In *The Story of Forgetting*, Able and Seth both struggle to find that hope.

Block said that Seth's character is based on an “exaggerated” version of himself, yet Abel's voice is more expressive of his own. “Able is an expression of all the things I'm thinking and feeling. I don't know why but it's freeing. I almost have a spiritual feeling about it because—where do voices come from? Or why does one voice come entirely? It took me a year of not writing a voice that I felt was compelling until one day, Abel's voice just came and it came entirely. I understood the parameters of it and what he would and wouldn't say.” He continued, “Voices hold their own history. When you are able to inhabit a voice, you understand its past and it tells its own story. This is why I'm a fiction writer and

not a memoirist. It allows me to express myself more clearly and do away with the factual anchors of my life.”

Today, Block is anchored in Brooklyn, New York, but visits Plano on holidays to see his parents Andrew and Deborah Block, and his brother Aaron. He moved to Brooklyn “for love” after graduating from Washington University on a scholarship he earned after being chosen as a finalist in the Intel (formerly Westinghouse) Science Talent Search.

Before the life-changing day at “God, Inc.,” Block worked as a cameraman shooting weddings, bar mitzvahs, and documentaries; he traveled to India for four months to shoot a documentary on the Laughter Clubs. Most recently, he met with producers and screenwriters in Los Angeles to discuss turning his book into a film.

That's not all. Block sold the stage playwrights to Rinne Groff in New York, who's adapting it for the Manhattan Theatre Club, so there's a good chance it will be on Broadway. And, the author has already delved deep into his next book: *The Lost Language of Eden* (a working title). Said Block, “I'm blessed to know exactly what it is that I feel brings the most meaning to my life.”

For more on Stefan Merrill Block and to view a promo for the book, visit [stefanmerrillblock.com](http://stefanmerrillblock.com). — **BRIT MOTT**

## excerpt

From *The Story of Forgetting*

I never found a way to fill all the silence. In the months that followed the great tragedy of my life, I sprang from my bed every morning, donned my five-pound, cork-soled boots and did a high-step from room to room, colliding with whatever I could. The silence meant absence and absence meant remembering, and so I made a racket. The rotting floorboards crying out when roused, the upholstered chairs thudding when upended, the plaster walls cracking when pummeled: small comforts when everywhere, always, the silence waited.



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