

## Interview with Summer Wood, author of *Wrecker*

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**Q: This book is set, mostly, in the wilds of California's Lost Coast. What made you decide to place it there?**

A: Well, it starts in San Francisco, actually, in a little corner of a park – Rolph Playground – that you can still go to. I lived in San Francisco throughout my twenties and loved that city with a kind of fury. Still do. I feel a little like a baby duck that's been imprinted with a kind of alternate mother. And so it seemed natural to me that *Wrecker* would be born there, that his birth mother would gravitate there and that – well, it was the sixties – there would be a jazz saxophonist, and – well, you know, all that.

But it was pretty clear that the story I wanted to write, the story of an unlikely group of misfits coming together to raise this boy, that wasn't a city story. These people were trying to get away from civilization and its constraints. People like that, they moved to Humboldt County. I almost did, but I was a couple of decades too late. I got to know the area pretty well, though, because a friend had a family place up there. I'd go up every chance I got. And I was totally enchanted. The landscape is so wild, so lush – it's a temperate rainforest, you know, those old redwood groves – it seemed you could get lost up there and no one might ever find you. It's the only part of California where highway 101 cuts inland from the coast, because the land is just too unstable to support a major road. It's a kind of – not Eden, exactly, but Arcadia. A natural paradise.

But we all know, there's trouble in every kind of paradise.

I guess setting Bow Farm and *Wrecker's* youth in Humboldt County – in the Mattole Valley – gave me a chance to explore that idea. To contrast the overwhelming health and beauty of the Lost Coast with the hellish setting of the state penitentiary, where *Wrecker's* birth mother is confined. And to take a look at how people act in both kinds of places, how the most noble acts can arise in the most horrible situations, and the reverse, too.

But also I just wanted a good excuse to keep going back there. For, you know, research.

**Q: Speaking of research. Humboldt is actually famous for something else, isn't it?**

A: Of course it is! But I'm not allowed to say anything about that. If I told you, I'd have to kill you.

Seriously, though, *Wrecker* is almost nothing about that. If it's about any crop, it's about blackberries. The wild ones that grow rampant up in that area. They're luscious and juicy and rich with flavor, and they spring up uncultivated along the wild margins of civilization. To me, those ripe blackberries – that's heaven. The real thing. You have to work a little to get to the best bushes, and you might get a little scratched up along the way – but that's how life is, right?

And that's how this book is, too. In spite of being set in the weed capital of the west, it's not about that culture at all. It's about the thorny path and sweet rewards of raising a kid. It's about love in a world where not everything is perfect – some mothers land in prison, some friends disappear into the woods – but where, in spite of its tendency to break your heart, love is the only thing that has a shot at saving you.

**Q: One of the things that distinguishes this book is the way *Wrecker's* mothers mess up, but don't give up. What can you say about that?**

A: I think it's very difficult to be a parent these days. It's never been easy, but the pressure to be a great parent – not just good, but great – well, it's overwhelming. Like if you don't get your kid into the right playgroup or preschool or find the right friends for him or nurture her algebra abilities – I'm kind of joking, but kind of not – your kid will grow up rotten. No, worse than that. Grow up *on the bottom of the pile*. Never make it in life. Never succeed.

Who fed us that crock of shit? I mean, excuse me, but why did we ever start buying into that?

What I love about the women who are Wrecker's mothers – Lisa Fay, his birth mother, and Melody, the woman in Mattole who, in spite of her complete lack of preparation or temperament for the job, becomes his mother – yeah, they mess up in a big way, each of them. They take wrong turns, they do the wrong thing. But they don't do it in a way that involves any kind of malice toward their son. They are motivated to do their best for him, and, in a way, that motivation makes them capable of so much more than they could have accomplished without him. It gives them access to a kind of strength they didn't know they had.

I think both Lisa Fay and Melody share a fear – maybe even a conviction – that they aren't good enough mothers. I don't know, maybe all mothers feel that way. I know I certainly do. Because, you know, it just *matters* so much. You don't want to mess your kid up. Maybe that's what's at the root of this gotta-be-a-great-parent neurosis. Fear.

But the thing I see with Lisa Fay and Melody – in their entirely different ways – is that the love is stronger than the fear. They each love Wrecker and that's a bigger force than their fear at their own insufficiencies.

**Q: And Len? He's not a mother. What is he, exactly?**

A: Ah. Don't you just love Len? I don't know what he is. Or Johnny Appleseed, either. Both men are enigmatic and just gorgeous to me. Each struggles with a personal priority – for Len, it's his sense of responsibility for his wife Meg, and for Johnny, the inescapable compulsion to protect the forest – that prevents him from taking as major a role in raising Wrecker. And yet each man, so different from each other, plays such an important part in who Wrecker becomes.

It was a great pleasure to me to be able to write those characters. To be in their company. In some ways it's easier for me to write male characters. Maybe because I watch them from the outside, not from the inside, so to speak. These two, they're so odd, such polar opposites in a lot of ways – but they are human beings of such deep personal integrity that they seem to me similar in spite of their completely opposite views and lifestyles. Len cuts trees down; Johnny Appleseed puts his life on the line to save them. Couldn't be more opposite, right? But for each their conviction is more of a physical thing, an inherent trait, than some intellectualized belief.

Of course, they mess up, too. Everybody messes up.

**Q: Everybody messes up, but nobody's a villain, really. How'd you get away with that?**

A: Easy: you don't need a bad guy – some personified source of conflict – when life is as hard as it is. The stakes in this book – they're impossibly high. This kid's life is in the balance. Whether he grows up to become a destroyer, a wrecker, like his name, or whether he manages to make it through with his natural goodness intact? Heck – whether he makes it through at all. Being a foster parent, seeing what those kids and those birth parents went through, it changed my outlook on things. I've never taken my own kids for granted, but before getting to know the little boys and their mom and dad, I don't think it ever occurred to me in such a visceral way what it must feel like to lose a child. Or to lose a parent.

The two main events of this book take place in the first two pages. Page one: Wrecker is born. Page two: His mother loses him. There's the great violence. That's the one truly irredeemable evil that occurs in this book. Everything else is an effort to come to terms with that, and to do the work it takes to overcome the harm that's been done.

Plenty of novels are structured such that the action builds until an event of great emotional power – often an expression of violence – occurs, and then a kind of emotional release is achieved. I was completely aware in writing this that I was turning that convention on its head. It was important to me. *After the disaster*, I wanted to know, *who takes care of the kid?* Who feeds him? Who makes him do his homework and sings him to sleep at night? Who takes him to buy size thirteen shoes for basketball practice? Who stacks one intimate moment on top of another so that a life can be made?

**Q: There's such a sense of the physical in the book. Did you consciously aim for that, or did it just arise from the place and the kinds of occupations the characters have?**

A: A little of both. I love things, probably even more than ideas. I love trucks and chain saws and kitchen rugs and back stoops and aging buildings holding their own against the elements. I love bodies of all kinds, too, and I like to see what happens when they get together. (That sounds voyeuristic. I mean this strictly in a literary way.) I knew *Wrecker* the boy would need to be grounded in a very physical setting, both because of his own extraordinary physical needs and because of what he'd been through. But in some ways it did just grow from the place in a natural way. Len and Johnny Appleseed spend a lot of their time in the woods, interacting in their specific ways with the forest and the river. And, if a writer lets it, any place as formidable as the Mattole Valley will rise up off the page in its physical strength and try to take over the book. The challenge is to tap that energy, but to support the story and the quieter characters so they don't get overwhelmed. I wanted to have room for ideas and the less noisy emotions, but I didn't want to deny the novel any of the vigor or muscularity that things can bring to it.

**Q: What was your process of writing this like? Did you just sit down and plow all the way through in a straight line?**

A: Um, *no*. Getting started, I thought I would. I'd just finished my first novel, *Arroyo*, and thought: okay, I've got the hang of this. I should be able to do the next one, no problem. Right? Got a good idea, got some energy, some time... and I got off to a good start. A couple of hundred pages in eight or nine months.

Not *great* pages. Well, some of them pretty great. Hardly changed, all these years later. But it's taken me a very long time – close to a decade, really – of intermittent work, and many many drafts, and reams of discarded pages to get this novel finished.

Why? A bunch of reasons. I was still building houses, so I couldn't devote anything like full time to the process. But it wasn't just time and money ... maybe I just had to write those hundreds of pages that would ultimately not make it into the book to understand where I *did* have to go.

Once I understood that, things opened up. I knew I had one more solid run at this in me, and that I couldn't do it in bits and pieces, and that I was going to need some help. So I threw a Hail Mary pass. I applied to A Room of Her Own Foundation for a Literary Gift of Freedom grant. A total long shot, but I got it.

That gave me about a year and a half to work without interruption. What an incredible gift! I am just immeasurably grateful to them for their role in bringing this book into the world.

And sometimes I think, maybe? Just a little bit? I might have had to wait until my own sons grew up to finish *Wrecker* and send it off. Who knows? Life is mysterious.

**Q: Any other questions you'd like to answer?**

A: Why, how nice of you to ask! I've always wanted someone to ask me what kind of car I would drive if I had unlimited access to all the cars in the world. And my answer would be, a magic carpet. Thank you very much.