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Jack O'Connell, The Myth of Quinsigamond

Michael J. Bennett

University of Connecticut - Storrs, michael.bennett@uconn.edu

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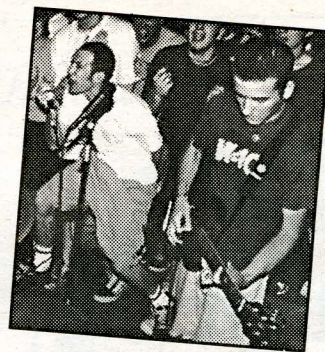
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JACK O'CONNELL THE MYTH OF QUINSIGAMOND



DEAN VANAL

By Michael Joseph Bennett

The two women on the hot dog grills take a quick breather and share a quiet joke as the six o'clock dinner crowd thins for a moment in Worcester's Coney Island Lunch. From somewhere an old switch is thrown and above the street neon glows mustard-yellow, drip by drip against the twilight sky. Soon the city's own, Jack O'Connell, arrives and takes a booth, easing himself in like a name etched into the rough dark wood.

From the time he was eight he would know his calling. It is a passion that to this day has never left the 39-year-old writer and is clearly evident during a conversation on his career and books in general.

In 1986, O'Connell's first published story, "Nevada", appeared in the esteemed journal, *New England Review*. An accomplished contemporary narrative, the piece would be an early sign of future success. Looking back, however, O'Connell dismisses the effort critically and sees it as simply a young writer's knock off on what was in the air at the time, namely the influential work of Raymond Carver.

"Sort of like a cover band doing an old Stones' tune," O'Connell laughs in hindsight.

Bigger things, however, were yet to come.

In 1992 O'Connell published his first novel, the eerie, noir-tinged *Box Nine*. The book would be a watershed event not only stylistically — with its stunning introduction of the post-apocalyptic world of Quinsigamond — but also in terms of critical success. *Box Nine* would go on to win the Mysterious Press Discovery Award that year, ensuring the author — among other things — a \$50,000 advance, two book club sales and eight foreign distribution offers.

O'Connell, a touch of awe still in his voice, recalls hearing the good news as, "one of those frozen moments. Obviously it changed a lot of things." Yet when questioned how the honor affected his self-perception as a writer, one senses a man firmly rooted in the basics of his craft.

"To be honest, this still feels like a quirky hobby," he says without a trace of false modesty. "I still get up at quarter to five every morning and write until around eight when I have to go to work."

Currently O'Connell is editor of the *Holy Cross Magazine* and associate director of public affairs at the school. To the many labels that have been given to him by critics such as "mystery writer" or "suspense writer," his concise-yet-eloquent response is illuminating.

"First of all, when I read mysteries, I never know 'who done it' ", he says with a self-deprecating chuckle, "so I don't feel all that equipped to write in that style, though I admire it in others." He pauses for a moment. "My impulse instead is to just simply consider myself a working writer."

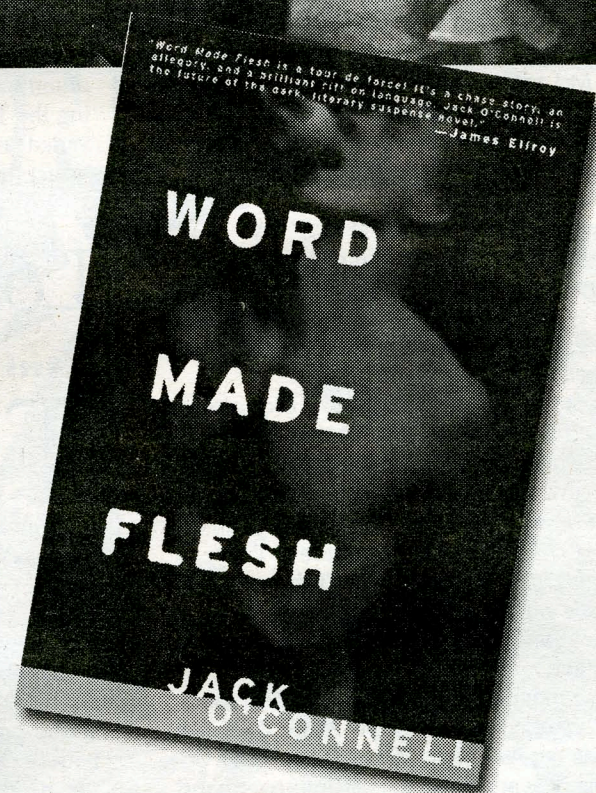
For O'Connell, the work has paid off. After *Box Nine*, there arrived a string of three successive novels on Mysterious Press, all set in the shadowy haunts of Quinsigamond, culminating in a switch in publishers and the recently released *Word Made Flesh* from HarperCollins.

A harrowing ride of visionary imagery, tingling suspense and human decency pressed hard against the knuckles of power and atrocity, *Word Made Flesh* reads like one menacingly frightful version of mankind at the frayed ends of history. Here geography and architecture have grown raw with age and include their parallels with the Worcester of the author's experience.

"I've never left," he offers as partial explanation to the locale's pull.

And indeed it is true. Born, raised and educated in Worcester, he has lived all of his life on home turf. His earliest memories, from cutting through a closed Union Station to catch the school bus in the morning to his first hot dog on Southbridge Street, are indelible. "People from Chicago and New York I used to meet when I was first at Holy Cross used to think I was crazy when I told them this city, ever since childhood, has seemed magical to me."

He stops for a moment, and you can sense him unearth impressions of the landscape like precious cargo, describing



it finally as a, "rust-belt, post-industrial town where every closed down factory has some strange gothic majesty," a spot where "a complex cultural history emanates from every doorway."

It is the grist he has used to transcribe the secret mythology of the place, bouncing his fiction off the drum of the city's current and remembered reality. O'Connell characterizes it best as, "drawing the DNA of Worcester and scrambling it to make Quinsigamond."

The conversation continues, but finally the staff begins to wipe down the last of the tables and to extinguish the flickering neon. It is closing time. O'Connell starts to push away from the booth. "Worcester," he says with a glint of the Blarney in his voice, "is always stranger than you think." □