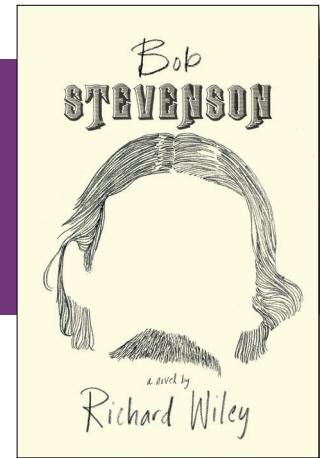




Bob Stevenson

A novel by Richard Wiley

Trade Paperback Original ISBN: 978-1-942658-16-0
eBook ISBN: 978-1-942658-17-7



“A witty, roller-coaster ride of uncertain identity set against the gritty certainties of New York City. In compelling, unadorned prose, Richard Wiley gives us a bewitching and ultimately moving tale.” —**Caryl Phillips**, author of *A Distant Shore* and *The Lost Child*

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Ruby Okada meets a charming man with a Scottish accent in the elevator of her psychiatric hospital. Unaware that he is an escaping patient, she falls under his spell, and her life and his are changed forever by the time they get to the street.

Who is the mysterious man? Is he Archie B. Billingsly, suffering from dissociative identity disorder and subject to brilliant flights of fancy and bizarre, violent fits? Or is he the reincarnation of Robert Louis Stevenson, back to haunt New York as Long John Silver and Mr. Edward Hyde? Her career compromised, Ruby soon learns that her future and that of her unborn child depend on finding the key to his identity.

With compelling psychological descriptions and terrifying, ineffable transformations, *Bob Stevenson* is an ingenious tale featuring a quirky cast of characters drawn together by mutual fascination, need, and finally, love.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Bob Stevenson is the first of my eight novels to take place (almost) entirely within the continental United States. Until now, my books have all been set abroad and explored issues of foreign languages, cultures, and landscapes. This novel is also an exploration of landscapes, but this time the landscape includes the confines of the human mind.

I have had so many literary influences over the years—Dylan Thomas, Joyce, Hemingway, Basho, Tanizaki, Robertson Davies, Alice Munro—that it seems now none have influenced me nearly as strongly as the impulse that all writers probably come to: that of finding one’s own path through the forest. I like to think of a writer as nothing more than an incredibly slow reader, someone who follows his characters along to see what they might do and where they might go. I used to tell my students, “A writer writes in order to find out what he has to say, not to say something.” It was neatly put, but students sometimes gave me looks that asked as clearly as words might, “Is it too late to drop this class?”

So, rather than continually talking about it, rather than making up more pithy sayings, I thought I’d craft a novel that dealt with those ink-black wells of the human psyche directly. I’m not the first to try such a thing, of course. Robert Louis Stevenson did it in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, so who better than him to try to recreate?

Bob Stevenson, then, is my attempt to let whatever and whoever might reside in the subconscious mind of my protagonist, Archie B. Billingsly, come bubbling up to haunt the corridors of Archie’s house and walk the streets of New York. As with all my other novels, I had no idea what he would find or whose lives he would disrupt, until the disruption began.





CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Many aspects of Robert Louis Stevenson's novels, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Treasure Island*, have become a part of our collective cultural knowledge. Is it necessary to have read them in order to understand the references in this novel? What extra pleasures are buried in *Bob Stevenson* for readers who know those books (or Robert Louis Stevenson's biography) well?
2. Archie B. Billingsly describes himself by saying, "I was Rob to my mother, Son to my father when his anger subsided, and Robbie to Cummy, my nursemaid. I was frailty itself to my doctors, but in my world of make-believe I was whoever I chose to be—a highlands bagpiper, a fisherman who lost his brother in a storm. . . ." What does this novel reveal about our "construction" of self? What role do names play?
3. How do we decide what was really at issue with Archie? Was he as sick as Ruby and Bette first thought him to be? Was he faking it? Or was it a mixture of both? Are we ready to accept the evidence discovered in the stairwell of Archie's house, or is that a red herring? Does the novel depict psychiatry as more art than science?
4. Is it remotely possible that Robert Louis Stevenson came back from the dead to inhabit Archie? Do there seem to be moments or places in the novel when no other explanation suffices? And, if so, does such a thing stretch credulity?
5. Is Ruby in love with Archie/Bob? Are her reasons for accepting the gift of his house convincing? Does what drew her to him at the onset of the story have the power to continue within her until its end? Can she see a future with him no matter what, or is love in this book, and in all our lives, a negotiation? How do those who love us know (or decide) which "us" to love?
6. Is Gerard believable as a high-functioning man with Down Syndrome? Does his ability to love and care for other people reveal that such great empathy is beyond the rest of the characters or does he serve as a teacher for them? Is Gerard's role in the book's penultimate scene believable?
7. How does the novel change in terms of theme or focus when Ruby's father arrives? Until that moment, it has been more a book about mental illness and troubled childhoods. Yet, after his arrival, the nature of art comes to the fore. Is this change in congress with the earlier parts of the novel, or is it jarring?
8. What role does Mary Andrew Michaelsonsen play in the novel, and how does it relate to the role played by Ruby's father? Is she simply another unhinged character, or does she represent a spiritual aspect not investigated sufficiently before her arrival?
9. Is the novel funny? If so, does the humor reside in the characters and their situations or in the language?
10. *Bob Stevenson* most fervently touches upon the nature of reality and the nature of individualism within it. It also touches upon issues of mental health, love, and the many ways in which art and life intersect. And much of it takes place during Hurricane Sandy. In which ways does this ferocious storm underscore the themes of the novel?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Wiley is the author of eight novels including *Soldiers in Hiding*, winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and *Ahmed's Revenge*, winner of the Maria Thomas Fiction Award. Professor emeritus at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, he divides his time between Los Angeles, California and Tacoma, Washington. Visit his website at www.richardwileyauthor.com.

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