

On books

Writer takes yet another step in continuing literary journey

By NANCY COLASURDO
Staff Writer

WEST WINDSOR — "There is no air in the City, but there is breath, and every morning it races through him like laughing gas brightening his eyes, his talk, and his expectations."

Steve Lopez draws his eyes over Toni Morrison's words and feels like a minor league baseball player who has just watched Ken Griffey Jr. at bat. "Nothing comes near to seeing writing like that to make me want to throw my book across the room and give it all up," he declares in an interview after a recent book-signing at Barnes & Noble at the MarketFair in West Windsor. Earlier, surveying the enthusiastic, mostly distaff crowd at the store, the former Philadelphia Inquirer columnist and current writer-at-large for Time wondered aloud if the bookstore's community relations coordinator, Rachel Simon, had handed out \$20 bills in the parking lot.

Looking as if he'd just stepped off the pages of a Dockers advertisement, Lopez was there to promote his latest novel, *The Sunday Macaroni Club* (Harcourt Brace, \$24). It is a story rich in ethnic flavor that, according to People magazine, "does for machine politics what Elmore Leonard's works do for unorganized crime."

IT'S A RAVE review and not unlike a host of others both this novel and his 1994 book, *Third and Indiana*, received; the glaring exception was The New York Times. Lopez makes no attempt to hide his frustration at being 0-for-2 in the one that matters most, yet reason prevails. "I know that I'm not a writer truly literary and I know that I'm not interested in writing mass market commercial stuff," says Lopez. "The problem in the publishing industry right now is that it's more compartmentalized than ever before and if you write something that's sort of in between, it's almost as if they don't know how to define it, how to market it. I think both my books are somewhere in between."

Still, *Third and Indiana* — a novel that shows us life in a drug-infested neighborhood from the perspective of an endearing 14-year-old boy — prompted a review from Pete Hamill (an important literary influence on Lopez) that likened Lopez to Balzac, Dickens and Dostoevsky. This proved flattering, but embarrassing for a man who hadn't read books as a child, in high school or at college and who was unfamiliar with the works of that esteemed trio.

"I just dropped Hamill a note and said there are a lot of ups and downs

when you write a book and one thing I would take away from this experience was how proud I was of his review. And how proud it had made my parents feel," says Lopez of the blue collar Democrats who raised him.

A NATIVE of Pittsburg (no "h"), an industrial town in California just northeast of the Bay Area, he graduated from San Jose State in 1975 and went to work as a sportswriter at a small newspaper. The Oakland Tribune liked his style and hired him to write news. Suddenly, he was in close quarters with people who talked about the museum or bookstore they'd been to the night before and he started feeling the effects of his cultural vacuum. "I made a list of books I should have, but hadn't, read in high school and started on them," Lopez says.

A *Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a host of other classics seduced him into a life-altering literary journey. Hence his reverence for Morrison's work, particularly the way she captures the feel of a city. "She'll go on a three-, four-, five-page riff where she is just so on and she knows as she's writing it that nobody's ever written like this before and nobody ever will," Lopez says. At the signing, Lopez had spoken of the influence of Hamill and Pete Dexter on his work; he added Morrison and Octavio Paz to the list during our conversation. How is it, he wondered,



Author Steve Lopez

that Pete Dexter can come up with a description of sea air that lets you smell it, feel it? Sometimes Lopez picks the words apart in an effort to find the answer. Then there is Paz, whose literary rhythms resemble Lopez's own and whose poetry has been known to reduce Lopez to tears. (Paz even makes an appearance in *Third and Indiana*: As his girlfriend reads him lines of Paz's "As One Listens to the Rain," Eddie Passarelli, a guitar player, is moved both emotionally and sexually.)

These are the writers from whom Lopez draws stylistic inspiration before sitting down to write himself. For more mechanical assistance, John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* is always close by. Thelonious Monk on the stereo adds the final dollop of motivation Lopez needs. "It's pretty pathetic," Lopez says laughingly of his creative process.

IT IS IRONIC that Lopez's novels are peopled with characters so immediate and believable and his columns occasionally read like fiction. *Land of Giants*, a collection of his Inquirer columns published in 1995, includes a piece about people who see Jesus in a sycamore tree; another concerns a pizza maker, a pharmacist, and three motel owners who try to clean the ocean with chlorine tablets. "Would you want your prescriptions filled by a pharmacist who thinks a few chlorine tablets will clean the Atlantic Ocean?" Lopez queries.

Classic Lopez, although his most cutting sarcasm is more typically directed at crooked politicians and mobsters. In what he calls his first and only marketing idea, he had his publisher plaster the dust jacket of *Land of Giants* not with glowing (probably phony) praise from other writers but with nasty (absolutely genuine) comments about him from prominent Philadelphians.

Lopez has received the H.L. Mencken Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for Human Interest Writing and a National Headliner's Award for Column Writing, but a Net surfer can find a Web site called "The Lopez Dispenser" and see his head superimposed on a Pez candy dispenser. He is riddled with self-doubt, yet feels he's accomplished more than he ever dreamed he would.

LOPEZ ENDED his 12-year tenure as an Inquirer columnist in January, using his final year to crusade one last time. "A few nurses I had written about got their jobs back because the stupidity and the heartlessness of the people who fired them was exposed," Lopez says. "I had a great time doing that."

Now his byline can be found among

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Lopez

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the magazines in the Time Inc. empire. Soured by a difficult national book tour, he feels especially lucky, as a novelist, to have Philadelphia as a base. Still, when the youngest of his two sons finishes high school next spring, Lopez will leave the city and return to California with his wife of one year, editor and screenwriter Alison Shore.

He and Shore were introduced through a mutual friend; Lopez fell hard on their first date. After a

month, with Shore about to move to California, Lopez felt it was time to assess the relationship. "She says, 'What are you, nuts? Do you think I'm gonna stay in a city because of a man?'" Lopez recalls with a laugh. So, for a year and a half, he flew to the West Coast every three or four weeks. Finally, thanks to a dear friend (Robin Clark, who died in an auto accident while covering the O.J. Simpson trial), Lopez saw the light. "He said, 'What you're looking for in a woman is the big three — looks, smarts, and spirit — and that girl is your trifecta,'" Lopez recalls. "So I figured, if she's my trifecta, I'd better marry her.'" *The Sunday Macaroni Club* is dedicated to her: *For Alison, and no one else.*

"She was embarrassed by it," he says.

Lopez knows that feeling well. A writer in the Barnes & Noble audience called some of his descriptions in *Third and Indiana* beautiful. She liked this phrase in particular: "... her voice fading into the overhead rattle of an approaching train, the sound of a million pots and pans rumbling out of a cupboard."

"I'm flattered and embarrassed by that," said Lopez sounding sheepish, casting his eyes downward and sliding awkward hands into his pockets.

But, just for a moment, Steve Lopez felt like Ken Griffey Jr.

Nancy Colasurdo is a Times staff writer.