

a “new town” childhood

Novelist Stephen Amidon reflects on growing up in Columbia

In the summer of 1970, my family moved to a vast, muddy field in central Maryland that my parents stubbornly insisted on calling a city. There was precious little evidence to support this claim. Only a handful of people lived nearby, few of the streets were paved, and the closest school was over a half-hour away. Consulting our Rand McNally atlas provided me with no comfort—there was no sign of this alleged metropolis in the empty space bordered by Laurel, Clarksville, and Ellicott City. As far as my 11-year-old mind could tell, we might just as well have moved to the recently conquered moon.

But then something strange and wonderful began to happen. Over the next two years, the city I had been promised—Columbia—grew around me. Houses, schools, shops, and playgrounds blossomed in once-empty fields, all of them bearing a seductively modernistic design that was nothing like the suburbs I had formerly inhabited. Streets and villages with whimsical names like Gatsby Green, Thunder Hill, and Jacob’s Ladder soon surrounded me. Best of all, families from all over the country, many of them with kids my age, arrived on an almost-weekly basis. By the summer of 1972, Columbia still might not have been on all the maps, but there was no denying that it had become a place of its own.

What was perhaps most remarkable about this urban growth spurt was that it so closely mirrored my own. My hometown and I were contemporaries; we came of age together. I watched Columbia grow from the ground up, from the inside out. I watched it become. This forever shaped the way I see the world. Most writers pass through adolescence in established communities, filled with traditions and strictures. They can rebel or they can tow the civic line. I had no such guidance. Tradition in Columbia was no older than the recently planted saplings that lined the streets, too scrawny to provide any shade. Evidence of the past was ruthlessly bulldozed and paved over. Columbia’s citizens, led by a benevolent planner named James Rouse, were in the process of creating their own traditions. This was emphatically brought home at my brand-new high school when we were asked to choose our own mascot. (To my lasting shame, we settled on the truly terrible “Scorpions.”)

It was during this time that I began to dream of becoming a writer. Perhaps I would have made a similar choice had I grown up in Brooklyn or Montana—I just would have turned out to be a very different sort of writer. The freedom from a local past, the sheer newness of my environment, continues to have a profound effect on my fiction. When I write, I start with a blank page in every sense of the term. I prefer faceless subdivisions, new developments, and gentrifying neighborhoods as the setting for whatever drama is to come. This refusal to import the past into my fiction is especially true when it comes to creating character. I find it difficult to write about people with freighted, Faulkneresque histories; with family ghosts or allegiances to clan or country. (It is also undoubtedly why, in college, I became enamored of the existentialism of Camus and Sartre, with its precept that existence precedes essence, an idea that could have served as Columbia’s philosophy—minus the filterless cigarettes.) My fiction is populated by outsiders, strangers,

people in the process of arriving in a new place and deciding just what they are going to be. This tendency undoubtedly stems from the fact that nearly everyone I met in those early Columbia days was engaged in the uniquely American act of personal re-invention: the Carneys and the Bangers, whose fathers were Vietnam veterans leaving that wretched war behind; the Youngs and the Fridays, middle-class black families escaping subtly racist suburbs; the Cohens, idealists leading their bemused daughters to the liberal promised land; my friend Guy, whose single mother was fleeing the inner city. I learned to understand people by figuring out who they were becoming, rather than who they had been.

This flight from the past was most evident to me in Columbia’s racial politics. We had no black neighbors in our former New Jersey suburb; there were no black students at my school. In Rouse’s new city, however, I found myself in a community where blacks and whites lived, worked, and learned in close proximity. At first, there was a giddy, paradisiacal aspect to this interaction. Black and white boys would gather without a second thought to play raucous games of basketball in our driveway; our first crushes and dates easily crossed racial lines. Before long, however, the bacillus of racism infected the community, let in by adults and the county police and the nightly news. By 1973, the schools and teen centers were electric with the possibility of racial violence, something that had been unthinkable just a few years earlier. When I came to write my novel about Columbia, *The New City*, it was the specter of racial strife, more than Vietnam or Watergate, that I posited as the main threat to Rouse’s Edenic vision of a new America.

But Eden it had been, at least to my nascent writer’s imagination, never more so than during those first two summers when my brother and I would wander the growing city in search of places to play. We often wound up in the unfinished houses that surrounded ours, perfect forts for fending off imaginary attackers or simply lazing about. Sometimes, I would daydream about who would eventually inhabit whatever room I occupied. As time passed, these fantasies became increasingly complex. I now can see that they were my first attempts at drawing characters. And they would soon be put to the test when flesh-and-blood human beings moved into the completed houses. Invariably, my own creations would prove sorely lacking when compared to the real thing. How could I have ever dreamed that the basement of the house behind us would soon be occupied by a mile of model train tracks, constructed by a taciturn army colonel who refused to talk about his time in Vietnam? Or that a bedroom in the house next door would be occupied by Fearless Fly, the adopted son of an African American judge, a sweet but troubled boy who would eventually disappear back into the D.C. slums? Or that an NSA spy would live in the house down the street, and that I would one day peak at incomprehensible top-secret photos his son briefly lifted from his parents’ room? This is the lasting legacy of my youth spent in the new city—the realization that putting characters on the blankest possible page is the best way of ensuring they will surprise me. ■