

[Q&A]

PW TALKS WITH JESS WALTER

Poetry, Pot and Money

National Book Award–finalist Walter (for *The Zero*) takes on the financial meltdown in his blazing new satire, *The Financial Lives of Poets* (Reviews, p. 30), about an out-of-work journalist's illegal plan to get out of debt.

Our financial crisis serves as the backdrop to *Financial Lives*, just as 9/11 did for *The Zero*. What prompts you to incorporate national events into your novels?

I come from a newspaper background, so maybe I'm attuned to current events. But this was also personal.

All around me last fall, friends and family were losing jobs. My wife and I found ourselves briefly without health insurance just as our house was losing half its value and a homeless couple was moving onto the bus bench across the street—and we were lucky. How can you ignore that? But *Financial Lives* is different from *The Zero*, which I researched and wrote

over four grueling years. This time I wanted to write it as it happened. Money and poetry don't often go together. What's with Matt's "Poetfolio" Web site?

I wanted to make Matt feel as if he'd been ignoring some quixotic dream that he indulges in 10 years too late, one of those half-assed ideas that caused my friends to quit their jobs during the tech boom (I will tell you if your clothes-match.com). As for the poetry part, I write poems about the lady in the thong at Costco, or who put those boogers under my couch. So I made Matt a financial writer and a closet poet—and since it's a novel about the crash—Poetfolio.com was born.

How did you research Matt's illegal moneymaking scheme?

On the advice of counsel, I can't answer that question on the grounds that it may incriminate me. I can say that I know at least as many committed pot smokers as I do committed writers (and the subsets intersect in

a few places), and most of them were eager to answer my questions. But I personally did not engage in any illegal activity during the researching of the book.

What made you decide to tell the story from Matt's point of view?

Often, the fact that I haven't done something as a writer is all the reason I need to try it. I chose first-person to make the novel

faster, funnier, more intimate and voice driven—so the reader is right there over Matt's shoulder as he makes the kinds of decisions usually reserved for 17-year-olds left alone at home with a quart of gin and their parents' car keys.

What's next for you?

Assuming I'm not unexpectedly cast in an action movie or elected to high office, I'll finish the novel I've been working on for a decade now, a big multigenerational epic about present-day Hollywood, 1960s Italy, WWII and the Donner Party. Oh, right, another one of *those*.

—JORDAN FOSTER



ODAN PELLE



See the review at www.publishersweekly.com/jesswalter