Character Interview Questions

Tell us a little about where you grew up. What was it like there?

Born the youngest of three children in the early 1900s, I grew up on a farm and ranch along the Canadian River in western Oklahoma. Early Oklahoma was in many ways a paradox—beckoning but brutal, innocent yet unforgiving, offering up both hope and hardship. Wind and weather tumbled across the region, shaping the land and people. For every dream fulfilled, another died. But it was also a place of profound connection to the land, a lingering frontier togetherness, and a trademark grit and capacity to endure. You could smell the earth and hear its voices. It was a place of wide-open skies and endless horizons; of the immense sweep and quiet stillness of prairie, with a stark beauty all its own; a place worth loving.

What do you do now?

At the novel's end, nearly one year ago, I was planning to ask Jenny Burns to marry me. Happily, she said yes, and we learned a few days ago that we're going to be parents in around six more months. I've been working on a second novel—this one about western Oklahoma and its early settlers. We've been building a new home on the property and hope to be moved in by the time the baby comes. It's an exciting time.

What was the scariest thing in your adventures?

The prison attack by Kushman and moments following were probably the most terrifying of my life. While I never glimpsed his face until it ended, I knew almost immediately who it was—and the deep voice left no doubt. I was acutely aware in that moment that my worst fear was about to be realized—and my broken nose and the bleeding and feeling of being strangled and suffocated only made it worse. I'll be forever thankful to Oscar Tasanko for the knife. I never want to experience such a thing again.

What is the worst thing about…? (Please edit)

The worst thing about spending time in the Oklahoma State Penitentiary at McAlester was that the place was a dehumanizing abomination. "Big Mac," housed around three thousand inmates in 1941—crammed into living spaces meant for half that many. The inmate population teemed with an assortment of thieves, forgers, bank robbers, rapists and murderers—some of which were feeble-minded, insane, drug-addicted, or sexually deviant.

My cellmate and I shared a space of eight-by-ten feet, with an eight-foot ceiling—stale, dank, choked off from fresh air or sunlight. We slept within inches of a cell toilet. A breeding ground for vermin and disease, the place reeked of disinfectant, and twice-weekly showers ran either too hot or cold. Prisons,

from the beginning, have been places without forgiveness, where our unwashed masses, cast aside by an imperfect system, waver between hope and despair.

What is the best thing about it?

If there was a "silver lining" to prison life, it was that you had a lot of time to think—to ponder some of the deeper questions of what it means to be alive. I also gained an appreciation for small things I'd never noticed before—the freedom of a bird in flight; the beauty of a dandelion; the wonder of a butterfly.

Tell us a little about your friends.

I'll discuss two I became close to—and two people couldn't be more opposite. I met Oscar Tasanko in prison. A gentle giant of a man, Oscar stood nearly seven feet, was full-blood Kiowa, and was serving time for assaulting two police officers he felt had mistreated his mother. Oscar had a somewhat grotesque physical appearance, with severe acne, several missing front teeth, and a gaping cleft palate—untreated from birth—that bisected his upper lip. He'd grown up being mocked by strangers as a freak. We'd become friends after I'd remarked on a beautiful picture of his mother he carried in his wallet. He kept to himself, and we often visited during breaks in the prison exercise yard. While most regarded him as having little mental capacity, I knew better—I found him to be wary and slow to speak—but observant and intelligent. He was a loyal friend—and there came a time when I owed my life to him.

Sister Maria was an older, Catholic nun of legendary renown who lived alone in the mountain foothills, on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. Revered for her miraculous healings and kindness to those in need, she was known to most as *Angel del Rio*—the "Angel of the River." I came to know her when I volunteered my help for a few months after her assistant was injured. She was amazingly well-read, and our evening-supper discussions and debates were memorable. One evening she told me the story of how she became a nun—along with that of a secret, long-ago love she'd shared with only a few. Her story eventually became a novel that changed my life.

Any romantic involvement?

I was deeply in love with two women in my life. Since both are discussed in vivid detail in the novel—I'll say no more.

Whom (or what) do you really hate?

While "hate" is a word I try to avoid, my sister Becky's high school coach and first husband, Benny Taylor is someone I grew to detest. I have trouble understanding how such a successful coach could be such a loser as husband and father. He cheated on my sister, abused her, skimped on child support, and

never showed at his daughter's wedding. Benny was driven by two great obsessions in his life—winning and seducing young women. Our family learned a valuable lesson from him.

Can you share a secret with us, which you've never told anyone else?

Much in the novel was loosely based on my family's history, and many of Jordan's reflections mirrored my own. He was fifteen years old when his father hit him—I was fourteen. The circumstances were much the same—I said something in disagreement with my own father—when I probably shouldn't have. Like Eamon and Jordan in the novel, my father and I healed our scars over time. My last words to him, as he died, were that I loved him.