

# **The Art of Racing in the Rain**

## **by Garth Stein**

### About the Book

Enzo knows he is different from other dogs: a philosopher with a nearly human soul (and an obsession with opposable thumbs), he has educated himself by watching television extensively, and by listening very closely to the words of his master, Denny Swift, an up-and-coming race car driver.

Through Denny, Enzo has gained tremendous insight into the human condition, and he sees that life, like racing, isn't simply about going fast. Using the techniques needed on the race track, one can successfully navigate all of life's ordeals.

On the eve of his death, Enzo takes stock of his life, recalling all that he and his family have been through: the sacrifices Denny has made to succeed professionally; the unexpected loss of Eve, Denny's wife; the three-year battle over their daughter, Zoë, whose maternal grandparents pulled every string to gain custody. In the end, despite what he sees as his own limitations, Enzo comes through heroically to preserve the Swift family, holding in his heart the dream that Denny will become a racing champion with Zoë at his side. Having learned what it takes to be a compassionate and successful person, the wise canine can barely wait until his next lifetime, when he is sure he will return as a man.

A heart-wrenching but deeply funny and ultimately uplifting story of family, love, loyalty, and hope, *The Art of Racing in the Rain* is a beautifully crafted and captivating look at the wonders and absurdities of human life . . . as only a dog could tell it.

### Praise for the Book

"The Art of Racing in the Rain takes you on an unforgettable journey through another kind of mind, through the eyes -- and nose -- of a dog. I found it fascinating."

— **Temple Grandin, author of *Animals in Translation***

"Moving. . . Enzo. . . folds thrilling track scenes and driving lessons into the terse family drama. . . Readers will. . . delight in Enzo's wild, original voice; his aching insights into the limitations and joys of the canine and human worlds; and his infinite capacity for love. A natural choice for book clubs."

— **Booklist**

*Courtesy of Harper Collins*

## About the Author

Title: Garth Stein

American Writer ( 1964 - )

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## Personal Information:

Born 1964, in Los Angeles, CA; married; children: three sons. **Education:** Columbia University, B.A., 1987, M.F.A., 1990. **Addresses:** Home: Seattle, WA.

## Career:

Writer and filmmaker. Worked variously as filmmaker, producer, and stage manager. Theatre Guild, New York, NY, assistant to Philip Lagner and stage manager for "Theatre at Sea" cruises. Film work includes: (director) *What's Wrong with This Building?*; (producer) *The Lunch Date*; (coproducer) *When Your Head's Not a Head, It's a Nut*; (coproducer) *The Last Party*; and (director) *Philadelphia Burning*.

## Awards:

Academy Award for Live-Action Short, 1991, for *The Lunch Date*; Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award, 2006, for *How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets*.

## Works:

## Writings:

## Novels

- *Raven Stole the Moon*, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 1998.
- *How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets*, Soho Press (New York, NY), 2005.
- *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, Harper (New York, NY), 2008.

## Other

- *Brother Jones* (play), produced in Los Angeles, CA, 2005.

## Sidelights

Writer and filmmaker Garth Stein was raised in Seattle, Washington, prior to moving to New York City, where he earned both his B.A. and his M.F.A. at Columbia University. His diverse ethnic background--his mother is part Irish and part Tlingit Indian, and his father is an Austrian Jew--and his ties to his family help to shape his outlook on society and have influenced some of his films and writing projects. Stein worked at various jobs after graduating from school, including as a director on the documentary film *What's Wrong with This Building?*, which chronicles the controversy over whether to add a new wing to the Whitney Museum of Art, and as a producer on *The Lunch Date*, a short film that went on to win a 1991 Academy Award for best live-action short. Other projects include *When Your Head's Not a Head, It's a Nut*, a film about his sister's brain surgery to help her epilepsy, coproducing *The Last Party*, and directing *Philadelphia Burning* and a number of music videos. Stein also served as an assistant to Philip Lagner, the head of Broadway's Theatre Guild, for four years.

*Raven Stole the Moon*, Stein's first novel, is heavily steeped in the stories of his Tlingit ancestors. Stein wanted to incorporate the tale of the kushtaka, shape-shifters that can steal human souls, and who exist between the worlds of the living and the dead. The book tells the story of Jenna Rosen, a young woman who, mourning the death of her small son two years before, leaves her husband behind in Seattle and goes to Wrangell, Alaska, to visit her Tlingit grandmother. Wrangell is located near Thunder Bay, where her son drowned, and though her purpose is to lay the past to rest, Jenna finds herself involved in something much less comforting as she comes to believe that her son's spirit has been taken by the kushtaka. V. Louise Saylor, in a review for *Library Journal*, called the book "richly textured" and "layered with vivid descriptions and characters." A contributor for *Publishers Weekly* observed that "Stein's restrained prose is a good vehicle for Jenna's examination of the nature of religious faith and belief."

*How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets* is the story of Evan, a thirty-one-year-old musician with epilepsy who suddenly finds himself responsible for a son he has never met--now aged fourteen--when the boy's mother dies. The relationship is complicated by the fact that Evan's own maturity level is hardly higher than his son's. A contributor for *Kirkus Reviews* found it "an unconvincing second outing," while a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* remarked that the book "is littered with life lessons that Stein weaves into the narrative with honesty and compassion."

Stein's third novel, *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, was published in 2008. The narrator of the novel is Enzo--a lab-terrier mix awaiting the end of his life as a dog so he can be reincarnated as a man, an idea he got from a documentary he watched. Enzo spends his

last moments alive reminiscing about his life with his master Denny Swift. The book follows these memories as he narrates the triumphs and tragedies of Denny's family during his many years with them.

When asked by an interviewer for the *BWI Books* Web site what challenges he faced writing from a dog's point of view, Stein replied: "Enzo, as a dog, has certain limitations: he has no opposable thumbs, for instance; he has a long, floppy tongue that can't be used to form words. But Enzo, as a dog, also has certain advantages: people will say things in front [of] him because it is assumed he doesn't understand. People will allow him to see some things for the same reason--Enzo is the ultimate fly on the wall. I had a great deal of fun playing with this idea. Of course, it all depends upon the reader accepting the premise that Enzo has an 'almost human' soul."

*The Art of Racing in the Rain* started generating buzz when it sold at auction to Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins, for one million, two hundred thousand dollars, and it posted more sales its first week out than his other two novels did overall. The book received mostly positive responses from reviewers, although there was some criticism leveled against the book. For example, a *Seattlest* Web site reviewer felt the book had continuity issues: "You see some of that strain, from trying to pull the plot threads together, from structural hurdles, and you shouldn't." However, the reviewer concluded, "if you're in a forgiving mood, the book is a rewardingly crunchy treat." According to Terry Miller Shannon in a review of the book for the *Teenreads.com* Web site, "readers will be moved by this warm hug of a story (and may find themselves looking searchingly into the eyes of their own canine companions). Enzo is a charming and witty narrator. His tale, while hilarious at times, is quite often heartbreaking, but it is ultimately uplifting and heartwarming. And I found the ending to be oh so very satisfying!"

In an interview on the *Bookreporter.com* Web site, Stein talked about his inspiration for *The Art of Racing in the Rain*: "The first seed for this book was planted in my mind about ten years ago. I was no longer working in documentary films, but a friend asked me to consult on the U.S. distribution of a film he knew about from Mongolia, called 'State of Dogs.' ... I didn't end up getting involved with the film, but the idea really stuck with me. In Mongolia, there is a belief that the next incarnation for a dog is as a man. I thought this was a cool concept and I tucked it away thinking I might some day do something with it." He continued, "Then, in 2004, I saw Billy Collins speak at Seattle Arts and Lectures. ... He read a poem, 'The Revenant,' which is told from the point of view of a recently euthanized dog as he addresses his former master from heaven. ... When Billy Collins finished reading, I knew I had to write a story from the point of view of a dog."

Stein is also the author of a play, *Brother Jones*, about a boat builder named Jones Riddell who returns home after twenty-four years to attend his sister's wedding. The work debuted in Los Angeles, California, in January of 2005.

## Further Readings:

### Further Readings About the Author:

#### Periodicals

- *Booklist*, February 28, 1998, Mary Ellen Quinn, review of *Raven Stole the Moon*, p. 901; March 15, 2005, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets*, p. 1267; March 15, 2008, Gillian Engberg, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, p. 25.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, May 16, 2008, Tina Jordan, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, p. 69.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, February 15, 2005, review of *How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets*, p. 195; March 1, 2008, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.
- *Library Journal*, January, 1998, V. Louise Saylor, review of *Raven Stole the Moon*, p. 145; April 1, 2008, Dan Forrest, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, p. 78; April 1, 2008, "Q&A: Garth Stein," p. 74.
- *Publishers Weekly*, December 8, 1997, review of *Raven Stole the Moon*, p. 53; March 28, 2005, review of *How Evan Broke His Head and Other Secrets*, p. 57; January 28, 2008, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, p. 38.
- *Sobriquet*, September, 2008, Christopher Willard, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.

#### Online

- *Alan Rinzler Web log*, <http://www.alanrinzler.com/> (May 26, 2008), "Emerging Novelist a Starbucks Hit: Q&A with the Author."
- *A 'n' E Vibe*, <http://www.anevibe.com/> (December 20, 2008), Deborah Ground Buckner, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.
- *Art of Racing in the Rain Web site*, <http://artofracingintherain.com> (December 20, 2008).
- *Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (May 16, 2008), interview with Garth Stein.
- *BWI Books*, [http:// bwibooks.com/](http://bwibooks.com/) (December 20, 2008), interview with Garth Stein.
- *Garth Stein Home Page*, <http://www.garthstein.com> (December 20, 2008).
- *HarperCollins Web site*, <http://www.harpercollins.com/> (December 20, 2008), interview with Garth Stein.
- *Huffington Post*, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/> (May 12, 2008), Jesse Kornbluth, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.
- *New York Public Library Web site*, <http://www.nypl.org/> (December 20, 2008), "Transcript of the Chat with Garth Stein Held on August 11, 2008 on [www.summerreading.org](http://www.summerreading.org)."
- *Plays 411*, [http:// www.plays411.com/](http://www.plays411.com/) (July 10, 2005), "Garth Stein."
- *Raven Moon Web site*, <http://www.ravenmoon.com/> (July 10, 2005).

- *Seattlest*, [http:// seattlest.com/](http://seattlest.com/) (June 24, 2008), review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.
- *Source Weekly*, [http:// www.tsweekly.com/](http://www.tsweekly.com/) (July 30, 2008), Amy A. Clark, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.
- *Teenreads.com*, [http:// www.teenreads.com/](http://www.teenreads.com/) (December 20, 2008), Terry Miller Shannon, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.
- *WritersandReaders.com*, <http://www.writersarereaders.com/> (December 20, 2008), Susan Wiggs, review of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.
- *Writers Write Web site*, <http://www.writerswrite.com/> (July 10, 2005), "Garth Stein."\*

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## Author Interview

### Garth Stein on *The Art of Racing in the Rain*

**Q: Where did the idea for the book come from?**

A: The first seed for this book was planted in my mind about ten years ago. I was no longer working in documentary films, but a friend asked me to consult on the U.S. distribution of a film he knew about from Mongolia, called "State of Dogs." I took a look at the film and the press material they had on it. I didn't end up getting involved with the film, but the idea really stuck with me. In Mongolia, there is a belief that the next incarnation for a dog is as a man. I thought this was a cool concept and I tucked it away thinking I might some day do something with it.

Then, in 2004, I saw Billy Collins speak at Seattle Arts and Lectures. He's a great poet and a terrific reader. He read a poem, *The Revenant*, which is told from the point of view of a recently euthanized dog as he addresses his former master from heaven. The poem begins, "I am the dog you put to sleep...come back to tell you one simple thing: I never liked you—not one bit." I loved this poem. When Billy Collins finished reading, I knew I had to write a story from the point of view of a dog. And my dog would know the truth: that in his next incarnation, he would return to earth as a man.

So I had the character and the goal, but I still needed the framework of a story. A close friend of mine, who is a semi-professional race car driver but who supplements his racing by working behind the counter at an upscale automotive repair shop, was going through some personal difficulties. His plight wasn't Denny's, but it gave me some ideas about what happens to families when one member suddenly passes away. I developed a story that would really put my main character, Denny, through his paces, and then it was all there for me.

**Q: What inspired you to tell the story from a dog's point of view?**

A: Using a dog as a narrator has limitations and it has advantages. The limitations are that a dog cannot speak. A dog has no thumbs. A dog can't communicate his thoughts except with gestures. Dogs are not allowed certain places. The advantages are that a dog has special access: people will say things in front of dogs because it is assumed that a dog doesn't understand. Dogs are allowed to witness certain things because they aren't people and have no judgment.

I was able to work with this idea a lot in terms of giving the reader a unique viewpoint into the action of the book. Enzo goes off with Zoë, and while Denny, her father, doesn't know what happens, we see through Enzo's eyes and so we do know. In that sense, it was a lot of fun playing with this "fly on the wall" point of view. Especially since the "fly" in our case, is Enzo, who has very keen powers of observation.

**Q: Is there any significance to the name Enzo?**

A: Yes! Denny's dog, Enzo, is named after Enzo Ferrari, who built one of the greatest car

trademarks in the world. Ferrari automobiles are famous everywhere. And Ferrari is a dominant player in the world of Formula One racing.

But I have a funny story about how I arrived at Enzo's name....

When I first started writing this novel, Enzo was not named Enzo. He was named Juan Pablo, after Juan Pablo Montoya, the race car driver. When my wife read the first few pages, she said that she loved what I was writing, but the name of the dog wasn't quite right.

**Q: "How about Enzo?" she asked.**

A: We had two sons already, and were expecting our third. I had always wanted to name one of my boys Enzo. I thought it was the ultimate cool name: Enzo Stein. But my wife very much disagreed. "We have a lot of different nationalities in our combined backgrounds," she reasoned. "Russian, German, Austrian, Tlingit Indian, Irish, English...but we have no Italian."

"But then we won't be able to name the baby Enzo," I said.

"I thought of that," she said, nodding slowly.

"I really wanted to name him Enzo," I said. "Enzo, the dog, is your new baby," she replied. "And when *our* new baby comes, we'll find the right name for him."

(For those of you who are interested: We named our son Dashiell.)

**Q: Are you a dog owner yourself?**

A: Yes. Our dog, Comet, is a Lab/poodle mix. She's goofy and silly and sweet.

**Q: Do you think people will look at their own dogs differently after reading this book?**

A: I hope so. Anyone who has a dog knows that they have some very deep thoughts, that they have moods and emotions, they get their feelings hurt. It's not a far reach to give them opinions and values and long-term desires.

The racing scenes deliver a real adrenaline rush and a feel for the intricacies of the sport. Is this seemingly expert knowledge based on personal experience or extensive research?

When I moved back to Seattle in 2001, I got involved in "high performance driver education," which is a fancy way of saying I learned to drive a car really fast on a race track. That soon led to my getting my racing license with the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA). While I did fairly well as a driver (I won the points championship in the NW region Spec Miata class in 2003), I didn't really have the skill as a mechanic or the time and money needed to really excel. When I crashed my car pretty badly—ironically, while racing in the rain—I decided to semi-retire from racing, and now I only race enough to keep my license current.

The funny thing is that while I love cars, I never really thought of myself as a "car guy." When I finished the draft of this book, my wife said, "So *that's* why you were racing. You were doing research!" I guess, on a subconscious level, that's what I was doing.

**Q: The custody battle between the widower Denny and the parents of his late wife is ugly and horrible, with the latter trying to manipulate the outcome by any means necessary. Is this over the top portrayal meant to be colored by Enzo's strong feelings of loyalty?**

A: Any narrative point of view is biased—the narrator has his opinions—and Enzo is extremely biased toward all things Denny and family. So what Enzo relates to us is filtered through a couple of things: first, being a dog, he's limited in what he is allowed to see; second, being so devoted to his master, his opinions are all highly skewed.

That being said, I have spoken with attorneys who have assured me that in custody and visitation battles, especially ones involving grandparents, things can get extremely ruthless, and it is not inconceivable that, for instance, one side might try to drag things out in order to put the other party into extreme economic distress.

**Q: What lessons can we all learn from Enzo?**

A: I'm not sure that's for me to judge. But I would say the important things for me are twofold.

First, Enzo's mantra: "That which you manifest is before you." I think it's very important to take charge of your life, not to feel like you're a victim of circumstance or fate, but that you are an active participant in your future. It's not a new idea: "And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make." (Lennon/McCartney) Where I focus my energy always matches what comes back to me in my life.

Secondly, Enzo's epiphany—the thing he learns at the end of his life—is that his assumption that race car drivers have to be selfish to be successful, is incorrect. In fact, he determines, in order to be successful, a race car driver has to be completely selfless. He must cease looking at himself as the brightest star in the solar system, and begin to see himself as simply a unique aspect of the universe around him—and, most importantly, as an extension of the universe around him. In this way, a race car driver sheds his ego; his actions become pure and as powerful as the entire universe, which in turn leads to success.

All athletes speak about the mental element of athletics, and it usually boils down to the same thing: if you can remove your ego from the game, you can function with much more clarity and you are more likely to succeed. Wouldn't it be interesting if we all began speaking about the mental element of our lives in this way? How would our lives change if we did?

*Courtesy of Harper Collins*

## Discussion Questions

1. Some early readers of the novel have observed that viewing the world through a dog's eyes makes for a greater appreciation of being human. Why do you think this is?
2. Enzo's observations throughout the novel provide insight into his world view. For example:
3. "The visible becomes inevitable."  
"Understanding the truth is simple. Allowing oneself to experience it, is often terrifically difficult."  
"No race has ever been won in the first corner; many races have been lost there."  
How does his philosophy apply to real life?
4. In the book's darkest moments, one of Zoe's stuffed animals—the zebra—comes to life and threatens him. What does the zebra symbolize?
5. Can you imagine the novel being told from Denny's point of view? How would it make the story different?
6. In the first chapter, Enzo says: "It's what's inside that's important. The soul. And my soul is very human." How does Enzo's situation—a human soul trapped in a dog's body—influence his opinions about what he sees around him? How do you feel about the ideas of reincarnation and karma as Enzo defines them?
7. Do you find yourself looking at your own dog differently after reading this novel?
8. In the book, we get glimpses into the mindset and mentality of a race car driver. What parallels can you think of between the art of racing and the art of living?
9. The character of Ayrton Senna, as he is presented in the book, is heroic, almost a mythic figure. Why do you think this character resonates so strongly for Denny?

*Courtesy of Harper Collins*