

Joe O'Connell Biography

Joe O'Connell has met a mass murderer, competed in a Spam cook-off, prowled a crack house, and spat seeds at a watermelon thump. He's an Austin, Texas, native whose early career focused on small-town journalism in Texas cities including Lockhart, Temple, and Victoria. He specialized in politics and won awards for feature writing while telling the stories of both the ordinary and extraordinary.

One day in 1991, a man named George Hennard came by O'Connell's newspaper bureau office asking about classified advertising. It was a fleeting, forgotten interruption in an unremarkable day. But a few months later—shortly after O'Connell had left his reporting job to study fiction writing—Hennard drove his pickup into a cafeteria in nearby Killeen and gunned down 23 people before taking his own life. Trying unsuccessfully to wean himself from journalism, O'Connell watched the horrifying actions of this familiar stranger on a television screen from afar, as he honed his skills at gleaning the truth of human nature that is at the root of fiction.

O'Connell earned an MFA in creative writing from Southwest Texas State University where he worked long distance with the late short story master Andre Dubus. O'Connell's stories have appeared in *The G.W. Review*, *Other Voice*, *Confrontation*, *Lullwater Review*, and many other journals. His stories have taken first prize at both the Deep South Writers Conference and in the Louzelle Rose Barclay Awards.

Of late, he teaches writing to graduate students at St. Edward's University and to undergraduates at Austin Community College. He turned a budding career as a movie extra—including two days as a topless bar patron in *Varsity Blues* and one day as a blurry guy on the telephone in *Courage Under Fire*—into a gig as a film industry columnist, formerly for the *Austin American-Statesman*, and currently for both the *Dallas Morning News* and *The Austin Chronicle*. He also has contributed to *Variety* and *Texas Monthly*.

O'Connell's novel *Evacuation Plan* is loosely inspired by three months spent, as part of a competitively chosen group of writers and visual artists, at Hospice Austin's Christopher House listening to the terminally ill, their families, and the nurses and staff talk about the greatest taboo of all: death. The resulting novel combines the observation skills of a journalist with the imagination of a fiction writer.

O'Connell lives on the outskirts of Austin with his wife Tiffany and son Nicholas.