

Alabama Novelist Talks Inspiration, Eccentric Uncles and the Beauty of Calamity

In celebration of the upcoming release of his debut novel, *The Essence of Nathan Biddle*, Alabama novelist J. William Lewis shares insights, inspiration—and tells how it feels to be compared to *The Catcher in the Rye*

How long did it take to write *The Essence of Nathan Biddle*?

I began writing the story in the mid-1980s. I wrote the first draft (which was largely biographical) fairly quickly and then put it aside for gestation. I also put it aside because I had a large and demanding law practice and legal writing commitments. Parts and pieces of the story would drift back into my mind (sometimes at odd hours or inconvenient times) and I would add, delete or tweak. The story became my refuge from the world to which I retreated, particularly when the world seemed to be too much for me. The unfortunate effect of all this is that I continue to be reluctant to let it go,

despite the fact that I know in my heart that it is done. It's like parting with a dear old friend.

How did you get the idea?

When my children were small, we spent two weeks at a beach resort we deemed sufficiently safe for them to run wild and free. (Each of our daughters took a friend, a scheme that relieved us of having to entertain them.) On a whim one summer, I decided to reread *The Catcher in the Rye* just for fun. I enjoyed it, particularly the aspect of it that struck a familiar chord with my own adolescence. I was also struck by the missing chords, the struggles with why and the exasperating efforts to accommodate the whims, desires and “programs” of people around me. That summer I began to sort in my mind the practical and existential issues that plagued me. My assumptions were that I was a fairly typical teenager and that, to the extent I was not typical, it might make the story more pointed. The object was to write about the angst that begins as a ripple in the early teens and becomes a tsunami as the adolescent approaches adulthood.

How did the book evolve over time?

The basic story line has not changed: the young protagonist reads the Rubaiyat and begins to worry about the why, experiences relationship problems, crashes a truck and becomes an invalid for an extended period. Initially, Nathan was a peripheral character, almost a voice like a Greek chorus, but he kept growing until, *mirabile dictu*, he became Kit. The same kind of thing happened with the other characters: All except Kit were initially bit players but something about them became essential. Some characters who were present in the early days just disappeared because they ceased to have a function. Anna and Sarah both grew in part because my eldest daughter remarked that the females in my story were all bit players. My answer to her was that I didn't know anything about females, to which I got the customary eye-roll, so I made an effort to strengthen all the female characters. It helped that all the female characters are based on real people. (Yes, Q. Ball's mother was fooling around with Roby's father, and I did in fact witness an almost-fight between the fathers.)

In addition to building characters, I added themes and symbols, and I began to layer the story based on my interest and mood at the time. Initially, the four parts of the book did not exist: it was all just one long narrative. Then, I decided to break it into parts. Parts One, Two and Three have taken turns being first in the narrative. Originally, the story began in the

hospital (now part Two); then I decided that I wanted to begin with the recitation of the background material as Kit explains it to the psychiatrist (now part Three); then I decided that the order was terribly confusing and that too much was in flashback, so I put the entire narrative (except for the truck wreck chapter) in strict chronological order. You will note that each of the first three parts of the book begin with the death of Nathan. I wanted the book to begin with the death of Nathan; thus, as each part took its turn as the book's beginning, the first line referred to Nathan's death. Over a period of three decades, the layers of the book are almost like a fossil record of my intellectual and psychological states.

Which came first: the protagonist or the story?

The protagonist is just a vehicle for a coming-of-age story. The notion that Holden Caulfield was too young to be the vehicle for the expression of the angst of pre-college adolescence was the *raison d'être* of the story. I am Kit Biddle only in the sense that I impute to him the struggles that I dealt with at the relevant ages. For dramatic or structural purposes, I added struggles that I never experienced (e.g., the murder of a relative, which I added to isolate Kit in a singular way) or that I experienced in a way that did not fit the story line well enough (e.g., I was not in a high school fraternity because my father said no, not because I was blackballed by a purported friend).

The Essence of Nathan Biddle has an incredibly authentic feel. Are there places, characters, themes, or issues where fact and fiction overlap—and if so, where?

If you've ever tried to write a story, you know that visualization is essential. It may be that some writers can describe something they've never seen but I am not one of them. The description of the golf course when Kit encounters Dr. Goolsby is a description of the 11th hole of the Shoal Creek golf course. (The Phoenix character who works at the country club is based on a beloved old caddy at Shoal Creek from years ago who was called New York “because I used to live there”; the Harbo Wallace character at the golf course is based on a grocery store manager who fired me without cause from a summer job.) The description of the coach's office is just a description of the coach's office at Spring Hill College, but the coach I describe is actually based on an intermediate school coach who gave every kid a nickname and my nickname just happened to be Straw. I hope that the themes seem real because the issues are universal or at least commonly prevalent.

Kit Biddle is the type of character that resonated with me so deeply—practically burrowing into me. I still think of him long after finishing the book. Kit is so real, which leads me to an important question: does Kit have autobiographical components? Are you, even in some small way, Kit Biddle? And if so, how?

In thoughts, emotions and physical description, Kit Biddle is based on me. In almost every other sense, Kit Biddle is a fictional character: I am not an only child and my mother was not a school teacher; my father committed suicide but it was after I was grown. (The description of the death of Kit's father is actually based on the death of my grandfather, George Robert Lewis, at his farmhouse in Escatawpa, Alabama.) Like Kit, my family arrived on this continent in the 17th century (Thomas Lewis died in Isle of Wight County, Virginia, in 1672), and the family has been drawn back to Virginia. Three members of my family are UVA graduates and my grandson is now a rising junior at UVA. Since the heart of a coming-of-age story is the process of coming to terms with life as it is, not as one might wish it were, the themes should resonate. If Kit as a character resonates, I hope that means that I have come close to the truth.

I absolutely adore your description of Kit's anticipation of summer, and his expectation that summers would be wonderful. That felt especially relatable. ("It begins with a giddy sensation in the spring, and I can feel the anticipation rising in me like a providential tide.") I love how artfully you depicted the brooding Kit with this seemingly-uncharacteristic giddiness. What was your reasoning behind this meaningful piece of character development?

Well, actually, I just attributed to Kit my own perception of summer. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has looked forward to the end of the school year and the grand promises of summer, only to find once again that the weather was hot and sticky, that I was supposed to fit my plans and preferences into someone else's, and that the gaps of time left to me were awkward to fill with anything I really wanted to do. I regarded the statement as Kit's assessment of the usual shtick of summer. He had worked delivering furniture and arguing with Anna the first part of the summer and then he had worked while Anna went off to camp the second half of the summer. Happy summer!

Kit Biddle is certainly an endearing character—one I found myself rooting for from the beginning. Despite his foibles, he is

eminently likable. What do you think is Kit's best quality? His worst quality?

That question may be too hard for someone too close. Kit's worst quality is probably his tendency to obsess, which causes him to hear only what he wants to hear and to see things only from his point of view. His best quality is probably that he wants to be honest. I think you get points for good intentions even if you ball it up. We are all the product of our environment: Our sense of right and wrong is partially built-in and partially the behavior around us.

Kit is fiercely intelligent and curious—and admits he "can obsess about anything." Do you think those qualities (intelligence, curiosity, and obsession) go hand-in-hand? Why or why not?

The peculiarity of the existential question is stated in the first pages of the novel: "The problem of meaning is strange and embarrassing. It is patently absurd not to know why or how you exist. . . . It is bizarre that a person exists for years before ever even wondering why. Then it seems sort of late when you finally focus on the question, and it seems silly even to ask it." Insofar as I can determine, the brain functions like any other organ of the body: It works best and most efficiently if it is exercised regularly and vigorously. Isaac Newton and Thomas Edison are instructive case studies in point: They had similar work habits, working obsessively and applying their minds to problems with such intensity and over such long periods of time that they literally would drop from exhaustion. The unknown is whether the obsession caused the brilliance or vice versa. I'm inclined to think that, given the genetic muscle to work with, the size and strength of the muscle depends primarily on the diligence with which the muscle is exercised.

One of the particularly fascinating elements of *The Essence of Nathan Biddle* is the philosophical thread that runs throughout. Do you think Kit's fascination with philosophy compounds or lessens his struggles?

Kit obviously intended to improve his understanding and his emotional outlook by trying to find answers. When he discovered that he would not find answers—"It was like a race we'd tried to run until we discovered that there was no finish line."—the struggle for meaning increased his stress. He had the notion that he should be able to determine why he exists. Silly him, huh?

How did you get the ideas for the characters? Are any based on people you know?

All the characters serve the story but virtually all of them are inspired by real people. All of them are bent and twisted to serve the story, some enhanced and some diminished. The girl who inspired the Anna character serves the perception/reality theme of the book but she also had her own issues to deal with. (The Greasy Mike scene on the country back road actually occurred as I described it and, if she were to read the novel, she would recognize it and recognize herself.) Ultimately, the inclusion of a character had nothing to do with my attitude toward the person in real life, but in most instances the character shows up in the story because he or she represented a significant coming-of-age issue.

In some ways, Bridgewater Academy becomes like a non-human character in *The Essence of Nathan Biddle*. What does Bridgewater represent to Kit? Is this similar to your own high school experience?

Bridgewater is nothing like my high school experience. It is instead like the prep school experience of my children. Like the YA writer John Green, I borrowed the close-knit intellectual community of Indian Springs School for the paradigm of Bridgewater Academy because Kit and his friends are a subset in an academic setting that, as the coach says, "Bridgewater stands for something, Straw." Indian Springs students are there because they or their parents have intellectual aspirations: the subsets of students there are the "cool" and the "brainy" so the subsets are smaller and simpler. Indian Springs has a chess team but no football team. (My eldest daughter's little subset were five intensely intellectual girls who, upon graduation, went on to Amherst, Columbia, Harvard, Yale and Stanford, respectively.) A public high school is a confused tangle of subsets that emerge, for the most part, from a chaos of objectives, most of which have no intellectual underpinning.

Anna—the beautiful, brilliant Anna—is such a compelling character. If you had to describe Anna in one word, what would it be?

The word would have to be Dulcinea. The girl who inspired the Anna character was actually at my high school for only her junior year and then her strange little family moved away and I lost track of her. It was thus a peculiar occurrence when I ran into her at a Young Lawyers social function when I first started practicing law. We were about to leave the party and I was waiting at the door for my wife. Then all of a sudden "Anna" appeared in the anteroom and stood staring at me. Her husband was walking

toward her when my wife and I went out the door. Peculiarly, neither of us spoke to the other. She just stared at me while she waited for her husband, and then we parted and I have never seen her since. I've regretted not speaking to her. She was still beautiful but I didn't want to be her husband.

One of my favorite characters in the book is Newt, Uncle Newt—Isaac Newton Biddle. He is positively charming, undeniably maddening and the type of character who practically leaps to life from the page. Where in the world did you get the idea for a character (who is a character in every sense of the word)? Please tell me Newt wasn't spun out of whole cloth.

Uncle Newt was inspired by my Uncle Newt, the late James Newton Conerly, my mother's youngest sibling. He was a tall, lanky bibliophile full of random data who literally refused to be gainfully employed. The real Uncle Newt was the last child of my maternal grandparents, born when my grandfather was fifty years old. Newt was precocious, which may have caused my grandfather to think that Newt's pre-frontal cortex (the part of the brain primarily responsible for value judgment and risk assessment) was as large as the rest of his brain. Regrettably, my grandfather was mistaken. At about the age of fifteen, Newt decided that school was an unnecessary interference with his life and thus refused to return to the schoolhouse, a decision my grandfather foolishly acquiesced in. Thereafter, Newt did very little other than read paperback books, which cluttered every surface of his room. Meanwhile, Newt was living at home mooching off my grandfather who was by then retired (except for doing some bookkeeping and tax return preparation) and unable to keep up with Newt's monetary needs. (The story of fledgling herons forced of necessity out of the nest was originally the moral of spoiling a child.) A truly amusing story (told in high dudgeon by my father) was that he at one point helped Newt to get a job. As my father told the story, he dropped Newt at his new employment and then went by the grocery store and then back to my grandfather's house to report Newt's new gainful status, only to discover that Newt had already returned home by taxi when my father got there. He apparently advised my father that the job was beneath his dignity. Thereafter, Newt came up with the scheme of getting desperate women to support him, a scheme he literally carried to the end when, being old and sick, his brother took him in. To my knowledge, Newt never had a job. By the time he was thirty years old, his wire-rim



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glasses were as thick as Coke bottles but he kept reading until the end.

Kit has a fine companion in his best friend Eddie Lichtman, whom he says “broods about things, sometimes as much as I do.” I really loved your development of the relationship between Kit and Eddie, how they would discuss the meaning of life, and particularly their having named the limit of their knowledge and understanding “the opaque wall.” Yet, Lichtman seems oblivious to Kit's struggles. What, if any, commentary are you making about friendship?

Over the two years my leg was broken or mending, my life changed but nothing stood still. People went on with their lives, as one might expect them to. I think it's a comment about life, not friendship. The visits dwindled and my book consumption increased proportionally. Now, here's the part you are going to find peculiar: After a while, I didn't want to be disturbed. My interests were in the books scattered about my room, and my visitors were never interested in talking about the subjects that were my primary focus, the ideas that were bouncing around in my head. Instead of worrying that people stopped visiting, I fretted

when someone showed up and wanted me to look at his new whatever or wanted to tell me about something that I found totally irrelevant and uninteresting. The situation encouraged my already reclusive tendencies but I probably read over that two-year period more books than I might ordinarily have been able to read over ten years or more.

In writing *The Essence of Nathan Biddle*, did you ever experience the phenomenon where it seemed as if a character—Kit in particular—took over the story? If so, how did that play out?

I think the phenomenon is far less significant in a coming-of-age tale because some character has to carry the flow. You can't take Holden Caulfield out of *The Catcher in the Rye* and you can't take Kit Biddle out of *The Essence of Nathan Biddle*. All of Kit's peers are coming of age too, but only Kit is seen from multiple perspectives. A reader learns a lot about Kit's fears, aspirations, loves and other feelings, but as a practical matter the reader can only make inferences concerning other characters. What does Anna really feel? Why is Dr. Goolsby married to a libertine like Anna's mother? What is Lichtman's love life? Why is Q. Ball not in-

volved in the search for meaning? The answers to these and other unanswered questions are ultimately left to the imagination.

***The Essence of Nathan Biddle* is a tale told with a beautifully sensitive touch—and it's clear that you have great reverence and compassion for Kit. Did you find it difficult to (literally) close the book on his story? Is Kit still with you to this day?**

Funny you should ask. In May 1986 my wife and I drove our beautiful daughter to Amherst College, helped set up her dorm room, and then left her at a school where she knew absolutely no one (other than historian Henry Steele Commager, with whom she and my wife had had dinner). When we left her, she was standing all alone in front of her dorm. My wife and I both cried but not until we had driven away. (That story ended beautifully in that my daughter loved the school, graduated magna cum laude, met her future husband, and now serves as Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the Stanford School of Medicine.) I mention the college drop-off because leaving my daughter at Amherst in May 1986 was easier than giving up the story of Kit Biddle and his struggle to come to terms with life as we know it. If only releasing my book into the world of publishing could end as happily as releasing my daughter into adulthood!

There are themes of dark and light throughout the book—and that juxtaposition makes *The Essence of Nathan Biddle* an extremely immersive read. Did you plan the dark and light theme from the beginning or did it evolve as you were writing?

Kit Biddle's coming of age in the basic existential sense—his acceptance of the limitations of his knowledge—is about what he knows and what he can never know. Light and darkness are natural symbols of knowledge and ignorance. The symbolism was there from the beginning but, as the years went by, I found more and more uses of light and darkness and I began injecting them at every opportunity. As Lichtman quips, darkness is inversely proportional to light, but later in the darkness of his hospital room, Kit can see more when his eyes are closed than when they are open. Perception always presumes light but some light is from within. From the outset, the symbolism of light and dark pervades: the wind off the ocean causes the lamp post to sway back and forth, so the heron is alternately bathed in light and obscured by the darkness.

The first line of *The Essence of Nathan Biddle* still takes my breath away. "On the first an-

niversary of Nathan's death, we went to the sea." This is such a powerful, evocative, and downright haunting line. How (and when) did this first line come to be? Were there other contenders for opening line as you were writing?

The first line is very utilitarian: It establishes the fact that Nathan is already dead when the story begins; it provides the setting for introducing the heron symbol at the beach (standing one-legged in the alternating light and darkness); and it lays the foundation for a gentle poke at Melville who wrote in *Moby Dick*: "But that same image, we see ourselves in all rivers and oceans. It is the ungraspable phantom of life, and this is the key to it all." (In my heretical view, with proper editing—particularly the elimination of several hundred pages of random filler—*Moby Dick* could be a superb 400-page fish story.) Kit says sardonically that he never saw the ungraspable phantom and he didn't find the key to it all. Of course, later when he and Q. Ball visit the river, Kit sees the phantom of Cassandra recreated in the image of the stream. We are left to wonder.

On the topic of the sea, you write beautifully about the ocean's almost hypnotic quality—and it is such a stark contrast to the storm that rages with Kit. Your descriptions of the ocean—"The hush of the evening was punctuated only by the incessant, rhythmic pounding of the surf like a gigantic heart"—appear to be written by someone who has a great love and respect for the water. Is that accurate? What does the ocean represent to you?

The ocean is a personification: it is a powerful force in the darkness that has a pounding heart. And yet the ocean provides an almost mystical balm. Now contrast the image of the heron standing on one leg in the pulsing light puzzled and wary. Of course, the heron is the ultimate symbol of Kit who is standing alone in the darkness. The ocean is described as a powerful incessant force, the heron as a cowering frail bird. The ocean is a symbol of God; the frail bird is Kit.

There are a number of phrases and passages in the book that I thought memorable, but one that really stands out is Kit's description of calamity: "It was calamity that gave me a moment of pause, an occasion for reassessment and redirection. I suffered both a breakdown and a breakthrough." What an interesting way to re-frame life's tragedies and calamities. How do you think that relates to real life? Do you believe that calamity is often a means of necessary redirection?

The truck wreck described in the novel is, of course, based on an actual event. My right femur was shattered and I ended up being unable to walk for two years, and the recovery required three operations on the leg. I was literally on one leg for two years, during which I did little else but read. (Since my father regarded my reading as a harbinger of another shiftless Newt character, he exhibited little discomfort about my injuries but great uneasiness about the stack of books my little brother brought me every few days from the public library.) When I got to college, I worked in a law office every afternoon (and some weekends), so my time was stretched thin, and I didn't have extra time for all the reading required of an English major. The good news was that I had already read most of the material assigned in my major, and I became the fair haired boy mostly, if not solely, by virtue of the wreck. Since my life is strewn with examples of apparent calamity being a boon (and conversely, apparent boon being a calamity), I am forced to the conclusion that life involves a lot of inverse proportionality and, at least in some instances, calamity is a means of necessary redirection and unanticipated intellectual and spiritual growth.

I'm struck by how easily *The Essence of Nathan Biddle* could have been a book about a murder, but is anything but. You parse out details of the murder in such a way that it is ever-present but not the focus of the story—and clue the reader in early on that something unspeakable has happened: "We had exhausted ourselves in hours of anguished fretting over a death that in any sane world was inconceivable." What was your reason in structuring the book as you did?

The murder of Nathan was not a part of the original story. The character of Nathan was inspired by a step-cousin (the half brother of my cousin, Dr. L. E. Rockwell, Jr.). I got the idea of the "sacrifice" of the only son from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, in which the mad philosopher laments that no one has undertaken to write about the implications of God's instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his only son. Thus, the murder is not intended to be a part of coming of age but instead a brooding omnipresence casting a pall over Kit's life and severing him from the herd of his peers. Most people have jarring events in their lives, events that cause discomfort (maybe even pain and shame), events that beggar rationality, intrude like nightmares in broad daylight. Those events create the angst of the omnipresence that one struggles to accommodate, to fit neatly into the boxes of one's assigned experiences. From the

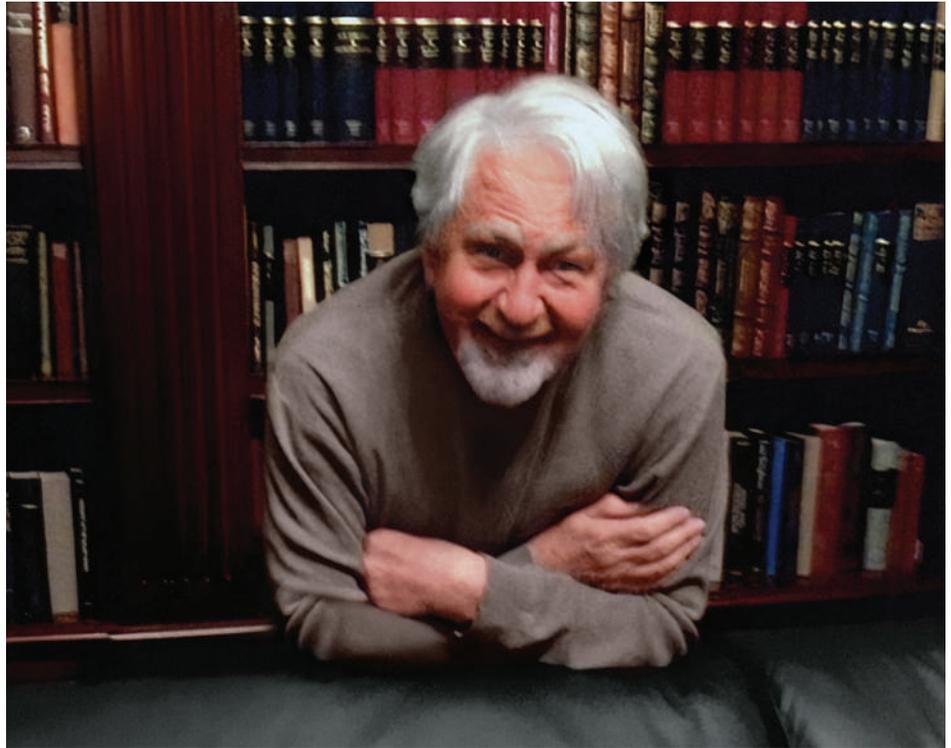
standpoint of storytelling, the murder is the primary reason for Kit's self-isolation; it is also a significant source of his spiritual angst.

How do you feel about the ubiquitous advice "write what you know"? Did you? Why or why not?

A very good writer can get away with writing outside his area of direct knowledge, but he will get into trouble quickly if he wanders very far from his own backyard. For example, non-lawyers who try to write legal drama must of necessity write derivatively; even when they get away with missteps with lay readers, they often look silly to lawyers. I just finished reading *A Gentleman in Moscow* which is beautiful and brilliant, but the story has Count Rostov and his adopted daughter living together in a ten-by-ten hotel room from the time she is five until the time she is twenty-one. As the father of three daughters, I can tell you that the arrangement might more or less work for the years five to ten or maybe even twelve but the years from thirteen to twenty-one would have been a nightmare. The Count would have shot himself! Towles' beautiful writing permits a greater than usual suspension of disbelief! The basic rule that you write what you know is, except in some metaphorical outer space, as solid as the law of gravity.

What is the best piece of advice on writing you've ever received?

I have only two vivid memories of my elementary school days. One is a pretty little blonde haired girl named Genith who lit up the room when she walked in, and the other is the time right after lunch called "Reading Period" in which the teacher read stories and YA novels to the class (*Treasure Island*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Call of the Wild*, etc.). Some of the other boys would grumble about having to listen to "all that stuff" but I could hardly wait for Reading Period each day, and I was always unhappy when the period ended. I never told my friends how much I loved the stories, maybe because I thought I was supposed to hate being read to. I loved the words and I thought it would be the grandest thing in the world to be able to write beautiful, moving stories. I mention these memories because some proclivities seem to be built-in. I started writing because I had some inner compulsion to do it. I have always done it for me, not for some person who might read my words. Nobody taught me to love words and nobody has ever told me how to use them. The fact is I've never received any advice on writing, and I've never sought any. I think writers are very much like physicists: I think they're



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born, not taught. At dinner a couple of decades ago (after the book was published claiming that some other person wrote Shakespeare's plays and poetry), the wife of one of my former law partners opined that Shakespeare could not have written the plays attributed to him because he wasn't sufficiently educated. I didn't want to argue with her (the fact is that the 17th and later centuries produced many highly educated men and women but only one Shakespeare), so I simply said, "Carolyn, I don't think it works like that." The room was quiet for almost a minute and then one of my other former partners at the far end of the table said, "I agree with Lewis. I'm afraid it doesn't work like that." Einstein worked in a patent office, not one of the great universities (at least, not until he published his brilliant papers) and he rearranged the world of physics. A mere patent clerk! Really?

***The Essence of Nathan Biddle* has drawn comparisons to *The Catcher in the Rye*. How, as a debut novelist, does that feel?**

Actually, considering the reason for the existence of *The Essence of Nathan Biddle*, it might be strange if the comparison were not made. In a way, Kit Biddle is supposed to be the

doppelganger of Holden Caulfield four years older. Holden is distressed but he never really verbalized why; he's sort of smitten with "old Margaret" but he doesn't yet know what that means. I have presumed that by the time he reached eighteen, Holden would be struggling with deeper and more elusive questions and perhaps seeing "old Margaret" as the scintillating Anna who shuts down his systems with the hint of a smile. And he'll focus on the fact that the real thing that's haunting him is the irrepressible why.

No discussion of *The Essence of Nathan Biddle* would be complete without talking about the heron. From that stunning description of the great blue heron "alternately bathed in light and sheathed in darkness" to Kit's heart-wrenching dream about the river where the heron appears, to the moving final pages of the book. Why a heron? And when in your writing process did the heron first appear?

The heron showed up one summer standing in the shadows near a beach house my older brother and I owned in the 1970s. The beach house was ten miles down Fort Morgan Road in what was then a desolate part of Gulf Shores, Alabama. I saw the heron standing alone on

one leg by the beach house just at the edge of the outdoor lamp post. Of course, I saw him a decade and a half after my truck wreck left me on one leg. The symbolism to me was just too perfect: like me, the heron was alone, wary, baffled and standing on one leg mostly in the dark. The heron may well have been in the first draft of the manuscript, but like some of the other characters he continued to grow in importance over the years.

This is a story that unfolds in the 1950s but feels incredibly relevant today. Why do you think that is?

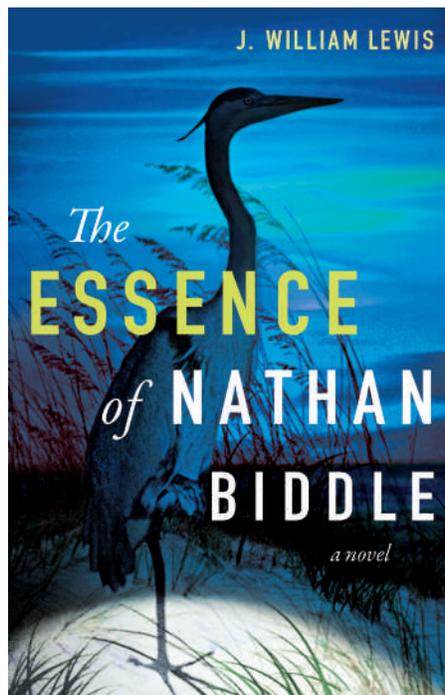
I would guess that the themes make it relevant. The angst of the teenage years is no different now from 1950. The intellectual, spiritual and biological issues and questions remain the same. Is it really relevant that drugstores back then had phone booths or that a call cost a dime? How does owning a cell phone really subtract from or add to the issues every person faces in trying to achieve an accommodation of life as it is?

Yours is writing to savor. There are passages and phrases in the book that just beg to be read and re-read, as one would read poetry. There is a lyrical quality to your writing that piqued my curiosity and prompted the question: are you a poet at heart?

I presume this question arises because Kit writes poetry and perhaps because the novel is in part a response to Kierkegaard's lament that "some poet" should take up the Isaac sacrifice story. In the early years, I did think of myself as a poet but when the roads diverged, I chose to become a tax lawyer because I had no money and no one to give me any. And that has truly made all the difference! My fallback position has been to write prose as poetically as possible. I still write poetry from time to time. I wrote the poetry (the sonnet and the limericks) in *The Essence of Nathan Biddle*, and I have also written poetry for my wife and my children and grandchildren. I am not, however, a serious poet. Like Kit, I don't like music very much but I love the sound of words. If you listen to the meter, you can hear the poetry in elegant prose. That is good enough for me.

What did you enjoy most about writing the book?

I have a compartment of my mind that contains words and images in great profusion. There are no numbers in the compartment, and a syllogism would be an intruder. I can't "function" in the compartment because the associations are fluid. Also, I can't always get in. I have to isolate myself from my surroundings and hope that the door opens. When I get it, I can hear words



In the beginning, I just wanted to complete the journey of existential angst. I had the feeling that many of those same people who identified with Holden Caulfield would also identify with the struggling Kit Biddle.

and see images that are not otherwise available to me. The compartment seems to be a special part of the verbal side of my brain, perhaps a sub-compartment. (I have a quantitative part of my brain that loves numbers, particularly geometry, and architecture, and even tax law, and I can tell when I've shifted out of it and into the warm, cozy room of words and images.) I cannot describe the joy I feel in my word compartment, and I cannot tell you how I get there. From time to time, I find myself there when it is very inconvenient or even embarrassing, because I cannot relate well with the external world from the compartment. It will have to suffice to say that, once in the compartment, I am isolated from all the chaos, pain and absurdity of the world. It is not always possible but sometimes I can capture in writing some of the words and images that come to me in the compartment. Sometimes I am just paralyzed by the beauty of it all, and sometimes I emerge exhausted from the experience. If I could live in the compartment and slide

the product of my perceptions under the door to the outside world, I would be a poet. For the most part, the writing of *The Essence of Nathan Biddle* occurred in the compartment where I went when I could. In addition to being a land of fantasy and joy, it has been for many years a refuge from the everyday grind of life. This latter necessarily meant that finishing was never the object. Indeed, the notion of finishing is almost unnerving! I had this wonderful separate existence—in this world I created and occasionally lived in—and then I hear this voice: "You're done," it says. "You're just polishing the fenders." That was and continues to be irksome.

What was the hardest part of writing the book?

That one is easy: The hardest thing was to stop writing. Even now I have to suppress the urge to edit and revise.

Why did you write *The Essence of Nathan Biddle*?

I needed to write and the story needed to be written. Of course, I probably needed *The Essence of Nathan Biddle* more than it needed me. A better writer—someone with more time and talent—might have created an 18-year-old Holden who is more interesting and endearing than Kit Biddle, but Kit is the character I know and the character I could, therefore, write honestly and candidly about. Kit and I spent a lot of time together in the verbal compartment of my brain.

What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

In the beginning, I just wanted to complete the journey of existential angst. I had the feeling that many of those same people who identified with Holden Caulfield would also identify with the struggling Kit Biddle. The novel is not supposed to be didactic but it certainly should be meaningful and real. I wanted to finish the story that Salinger began. In the best of all worlds, readers would be entertained on multiple levels: the words (which should be more enjoyable and meaningful than the plot), the reality and truth of the experience, the joy of watching metaphorically as a kindred spirit struggles with and sorts out the foibles of adolescence and the existential angst that never goes away. Having said all that, the truth is that the book was written for me and thus I never gave any consideration to the thoughts or feelings of someone who might read it in the future. The book took so long to write that it is doubtful that it could ever mean as much to any reader as it has meant to me. The journey has certainly been more significant to me than the destination. I fully expect and hope that many readers will also love the journey.