

Books

City Writs

by [Maura Johnston](#)

A homeless man, a benevolent medical examiner with a penchant for Poe and a woman who tries to make a connection through the "Anything Goes" ads in the back of the *Philadelphia Weekly*--they could be from different worlds, but in Peter Rock's "Disentangling," their paths intertwine and ultimately collide.



"One thing that struck me early on in Philly was just how many people I came into contact with every day, and how many possibilities might arise," author Rock says. "I mean, we can forge connections in so many possible ways. It became extremely hypothetical with me: What kind of connections might there be between unlike people? How might they be forged? And could people be touching and influencing and infecting each other with hope?"

Rock, who teaches writing at the University of Pennsylvania and Yale, moved to Philadelphia from San Francisco (Philly's "opposite," he insists, "and an inferior city") after living mostly out West and writing two novels, *This Is the Place* and *Carnival Wolves*. "Much of my work to this point had taken place on ranches, in desolate spaces," he says.

The culture shock that came with the cross-country move forced Rock to confront the way he looked to wide-open spaces for comfort. "Disentangling" is a response to the constant interpersonal stimuli of Philadelphia.

Moving to a cramped East Coast city presented a tableau that was completely different. "I'd never before lived in such close contact with so many different kinds of people, and I'd never really attempted to set any of my fiction in an urban environment," he says. "So it was a good challenge."

The gloom within Rock's descriptions of this "post-industrial" setting (along the banks of the Schuylkill between the South Street Bridge and the Art Museum) is perfectly pitched, placing the story definitively in Philadelphia.

The references to Edgar Allan Poe that fade in and out of the narrative add to the Philadelphia feel as well. "I got kind of obsessed with Poe, an obsession that hasn't really gone away, and probably won't," says Rock. "I started to spend a lot of time at the Poe Historical Site. It wasn't that I wanted to write about that place, or about him so much, but I was carrying all this sensibility and information."

After moving to Philadelphia, Rock's wife, a medical student, encouraged him to attend a lunchtime

presentation by the Philadelphia medical examiner. "I learned enough there that I started to wonder about what it would be like, trying to explain causes of death every day and night. It's certainly an area where Poe would have felt comfortable."

The fusing of the two led to "Disentangling," with a Poe-obsessed medical examiner whose professional notoriety prompts his attempts to bring good to people. The story appears in Volume 5, Issue 1 of *Zoetrope All-Story*, Francis Ford Coppola's four-year-old journal of short fiction.

The magazine is a showcase for stories that "have been or may be adapted for film." *Zoetrope's* contributing writers must, in exchange, give the publication first serial rights and a film option.

"I guess Coppola owns the option. If he exercises it, then I think I'd get first crack at adapting the thing," says Rock.

Rock's next novel, *The Ambidextrist*, will also be set in Philadelphia. "It's about a man who lives along the river and supports himself as a medical subject in trials run at Penn and by SmithKline. It's extremely Philadelphia." The novel will be published in spring of 2002.

Peter Rock's "Disentangling" can be found at www.zoetrope-stories.com.