

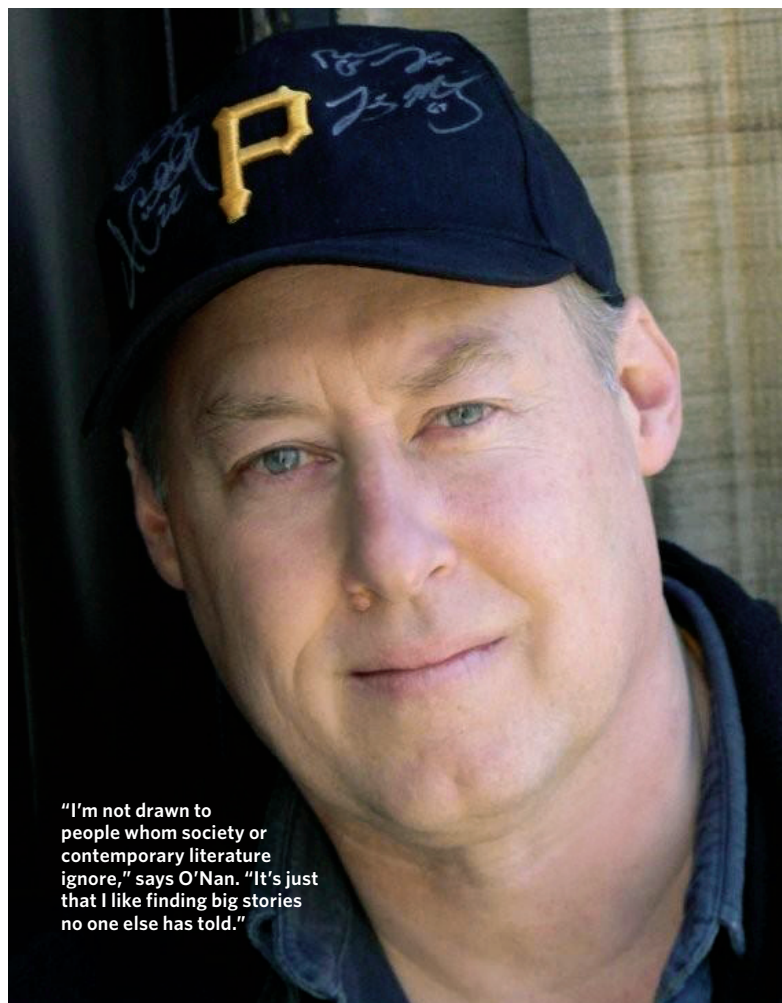
## ALUMNI BOOKS

### A Widow's Life

Stewart O'Nan (ENG'83)  
returns to Emily Maxwell

BY JOHN O'ROURKE

Stewart O'Nan has spent much of his prolific career writing about the kinds of people whose lives are rarely examined: a chain restaurant manager (*Last Night at the Lobster*), a young pregnant woman whose husband is in prison (*The Good Wife*), an ordinary suburban family whose life is upended when their daughter is abducted (*Songs for the Missing*). In each, O'Nan imbues his characters with a quiet dignity.



"I'm not drawn to people whom society or contemporary literature ignore," says O'Nan. "It's just that I like finding big stories no one else has told."

TRUDY O'NAN

His latest novel, *Emily, Alone*, depicts the life of 78-year-old widow Emily Maxwell. Readers familiar with O'Nan's work will recall that Emily first appeared in 2002's *Wish You Were Here*, a sprawling story about a family's weeklong vacation at a lake in upstate New York. Emily was newly widowed then and preparing to sell the family's beloved cabin, much to the consternation of her two grown children.

Now it is seven years later, and Emily's world is growing increasingly smaller as friends die or move away. Her life is quiet, governed by gardening, classical music, the needs of her aging dog, and a weekly trip with her sister-in-law, Arlene, to a local restaurant for the two-for-one breakfast buffet. But when Arlene suddenly collapses during one of their outings, Emily is forced to become more independent. And in small but important ways, her life takes on deeper meaning.

O'Nan (ENG'83) writes with compassion about what it's like to be an elderly woman living alone in contemporary America: the indignities, the sorrows of watching those you love die. Emily is not always easy to like. She's opinionated and resolutely old-fashioned, and she sets high standards for herself and those around her. But O'Nan has such affection for her that the reader can't help but cheer her on as she haltingly ventures out into the world.

In her *New York Times* review of *Emily, Alone*, Joanna Smith Rakoff points to the "spiraling, exact sentences and the beautiful, subtle symbolism," of O'Nan's "best novel yet." *Kirkus Reviews* calls it "rueful and autumnal but very moving." And the *Los Angeles Times* hails Emily as "a kind of role model" for all of us as we approach our twilight years.

O'Nan spoke recently with *Bostonia* about *Emily, Alone* (Viking 2011), his 12th novel and first sequel.

***Bostonia*: What is it about Emily Maxwell that made you want to write about her again?**

*O'Nan*: Originally, *Wish You Were Here* was going to be all Emily, but once I met the other Maxwells, I became interested

in all of them—separately and as a family—so I knew I had unfinished business with her. I think you can go deeper into a character when you're restricted to a single point of view, and she had enough going on that I knew I could write a whole book about just her. And because I'd spent several years imagining Emily and her family and had already delved into her relationships, I could go further. It was like having a big head start.

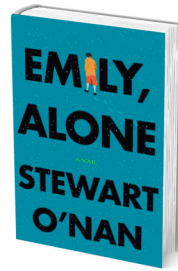
**We first met Emily seven years ago. How has she changed in the intervening years?** I think Emily's mellowed some. She understands her own shortcomings more, and wants to make peace with the world and herself.

**You've described *Emily, Alone* as a memory book. How so?**

I call *Emily, Alone* a memory book because, living alone, Emily's continuously beset by her past, which she's yet to come to terms with. She's looking back, taking stock, and holding herself accountable. Now that her life is nearly over, she's wondering, how did she do? I think most people do that as we grow older—gain some perspective on our own lives, and those around us—and it's often difficult, but Emily tries to be honest. And that's really the book: how she tries to understand her life—the small moments in the present and the deeper emotions of the past. She attempts to make things right with those still living and to pay tribute to those who are gone. In that way, I think she's courageous.

**It's often been said that you write about people ignored by society. What draws you to your subjects?**

I'm not drawn to people whom society or contemporary literature ignore; it's just that I like finding big stories no one else has told. Big stories hiding in plain sight, like people working at chain restaurants (millions!) or the families of prisoners (millions!) or someone like Emily. Everyone has an Emily—a mother, a grandmother, an



aunt, a sister—but we rarely see her reflected in any serious, intimate way. It's making the invisible visible—letting readers get close and spend time with a person they normally wouldn't pay any attention to.

**How did you get inside the head of a septuagenarian?**

I knew a lot about Emily from *Wish You Were Here*, but I also kept a big notebook while I was writing, and when I wasn't writing, I'd go through the world with her (metaphorical) mask on, asking myself, in every situation, what would Emily think of this? Also, when I was doing lunchtime readings at libraries, mostly to older audiences, I'd hand out questionnaires for people to fill out, asking them what and who they missed from their neighborhoods or towns, places they went, things that bothered them.

**Did you draw on people in your own life for inspiration in creating Emily?**

Emily shares similarities with my mother, my mother-in-law, my aunts, and my grandmothers, but really, like Flaubert and Madame Bovary, I have to say, "Emily, c'est moi."

**After majoring in engineering at BU, you went to work in the aerospace industry. How did you gravitate to writing fiction for a living?**

The jump from aerospace engineering to writing seemed natural to me, since I've always been a big reader and engineering is about analyzing how things work in the real world. The question you're always answering is: what would really happen? While I took only two English classes at BU, intermediate comp and the American short novel, I regularly haunted the stacks at Mugar, seeking out writers like Camus and Beckett. And then when I was working at a muffler warehouse before I got my engineering job at Grumman, I'd come home and write stories at night. So even then—1984—I was already living in two worlds.

## REVIEWS

### Fiction

#### Big Girl Small

Rachel DeWoskin (GRS'00)

*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*

THE NARRATOR OF DeWoskin's alternately tender and raw coming-of-age tale is a little person with a big voice, and, as the book opens, a big problem. At three feet, nine inches tall, Judy Lohden, 16, is a fiercely talented singer as well as a wry observer of both teenage and adult culture. Judy tells most of her story from the seedy motel where she is hiding out, for reasons that slowly come to light.

Judy has left the familiar embrace of her Ann Arbor, Mich., public school for the prestigious performing arts school Darcy Academy ("D'Arts"); think *Fame* with cell phones and Facebook.

Although she spares us most of what Holden Caulfield would call "that David Copperfield kind of crap," we do learn that Judy's parents, who run the homey Judy's Grill, remain

solidly, sometimes giddily in love. Judy has an older brother, and she says that her younger brother, Sam, is living proof that her parents "weren't scared off the project" after spawning her. And even though "My mom likes my dad," as she puts it, "what she loves most is the three of us." Judy's rants are mum on the pandemic of "phonies," but she does manage to channel Caulfield (readers will bet "Lohden" is an anagram) in contemporary teenspeak: "I sat, as I do in every class, in the back row. From there, I could observe my gleeful actor and dancer classmates...talk about how, oh my god, this year AP bio was going to be so gross...and placements for voice classes were already under way and had you

