



***DELIVERING VIRTUE* QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

If you've read *Delivering Virtue*, you may want some questions answered. This book can be read on many levels, an exciting, entertaining adventure or a story resonant of myth and religion with layers and layers of meaning. Here is a Q & A with the author, Brian Kindall. If you haven't read it yet, don't worry, there aren't any spoilers in this, and it might enhance your reading experience. The above painting is an illustration of the poem excerpted at the front of the book, *Sadak the Wanderer* by Shelley (the painting is by John Martin).

Q & A with Brian Kindall about adult fiction novel, *Delivering Virtue*

- The first thing that strikes a reader of *Delivering Virtue* is the voice of its main character, Didier Rain. How did you ever come up with such an eccentric and engaging oddity?

Honestly, Rain came to me, looking for someone to serve as medium for his story. Or at least that's how it felt when I started writing. I was just a channel for the voice of this poetic, good-hearted nincompoop. That's Rain's highfalutin language and skewed philosophy you're reading. That's his comical overblown vocabulary. Writers dream of being taken over like that. It means we're somehow synced up with the Great Muse. I'd just show up at my desk every day and see where Didier Rain was going to take me next. It's humbling when it happens that way, but exciting. It's sort of like when you're an actor, and a role completely takes you over.

- What would you say Rain wants most from life?

More than anything else, I'd say he wants love. To love someone, and be loved. He's just misguided in how to achieve that. He's had some lousy examples in his life. And he isn't quite sure where the physical part of love comes in. What's love, and what's just sex? He spends a lot of time trying to figure that out. Sometimes comically, sometimes with some pretty harsh consequences.

- Delivering Virtue is set in the American West of 1854. Why did you choose that time and place for your novel?

America has been a country of profound change since the beginning. New religions were born here, new industries, and new systems of government. It has always been a brave new world full of fledgling traditions. But by the mid 1800s, the frontier was being settled and gobbled up. Things were shifting into the general shape they would remain for the duration. Churches were putting down their roots in the west – most especially the Mormons – and the Natives were being displaced or eradicated. The whites were doing all of this under the philosophy of “Manifest Destiny,” which was the belief that the U.S. Government’s expansion throughout the America’s was justified and inevitable. Every American interpreted this destiny in his or her own way. And everyone was scrambling to get a piece of the pie. Gold seekers, homesteaders, businessmen, and religious leaders. In the feeding frenzy, all of those spiritual and entrepreneurial urges got mixed together. The purest elements that the wilderness had to offer became submerged or trampled beneath the white man’s run-amuck hungers.

I chose this world for my novel because it was one of conflict between purity and vanity, nature and man, mystery and greed. Didier Rain – the book’s would-be hero – is a man torn by these same forces. He senses that there’s something magical in the world, even spiritual, and now, by way of a prophecy, he has been chosen to deliver the essence of that magic to its rightful place in the Frontier. His story is one of overcoming his own base tendencies, protecting Virtue, and somehow navigating the moral chaos toward his own precarious salvation. His dilemmas parallel that of the American West at that time. In addition to that, Rain is a man steeped in poetic traditions. It only makes sense that a man so enamored of Coleridge, Shelly, Dante, and Homer should have a setting and adventure worthy of those great romantic and epic poets.

- So technically this book falls under the genre of a Western. How would you say your western is different from others?

Most westerns are based in a gritty realism. The characters grovel and fight their way through a rough and tumble world of lawlessness and hardship. My novel has that too. After all, the entire middle section of the book is called “Perils.” But my world is more surreal than that offered in other westerns. This is largely because it is a world interpreted through a character who is poetic, idealistic, and somewhat delusional. The misfits peopling my frontier are more exaggerated – at times more grotesque, at other times more angelic – because they match Didier Rain’s own indecisive and exaggerated oddball character. It’s as if the landscapes and characters he encounters are extensions of his personality. But the main difference in my novel is that it has an element of Magical Realism. That’s fairly rare in westerns. We experience it all along Rain’s journey. And we most especially realize it in the young girl, Virtue. She is not typical. She might even be divine, which becomes more and more apparent as the pages roll by.

- At times this book is hilarious, at times poignant, even disturbing. Why not stick with one or the other – comedy or tragedy?

Like life, it’s a mixed bag. Some of it’s funny, some not so much. We take our sorrows and turn them into humor. If you’ve had enough darkness in your life, as Rain has, dark humor is the inevitable result. To Rain’s credit, he is resilient. He’s suffered, but he’s always quick with a joke. It’s his defense against the absurdity, pain, and darkness in his life. He’s a master of comic relief. It’s perhaps his one admirable trait. I think it’s what makes him so likeable, even when you consider all of his other many faults.

- About those faults – Rain is despicable in so many ways, and yet we do still like him. How does a writer manage that?

Whereas a typical citizen of the world conforms to its rules and ethical codes, Rain is ambivalent. He just can’t quite overcome his more lascivious animal urges. I think if we like him, or honestly, if we

have a reaction against him, it's because we recognize in him a repressed part of ourselves. He is every person to some extent, just not the civilized part you'd want dating your daughter. But he's trying. That's what makes him so endearing. That, and he's very funny. Also, as the story progresses, we realize he has good reasons for being who he is. He is the result of the life he has been handed, especially of his childhood. There's some serious Oedipal confusion he's trying to sort out in his life. We tend to feel empathy for him because of his struggles. As a writer, if I show those struggles clearly, and without sentimentality, they tend to resonate genuinely with the reader.

- You've described *Delivering Virtue* as a "picaresque." What does that mean?

Traditionally, a picaresque is a story featuring an outsider – someone on the fringes of society who lives by his or her wits and is having a problem coming to grips with who he or she is in relation to the world. Think *Huck Finn* or *Don Quixote*.

In the history of literature, picaresque novels have been popular as a means of satire, and there's a bit of that in my book as well. There's nothing like following the point of view of a nonconformist to show us the world from another angle, and expose society's hypocrisies and weirdness. The weirdness in *Delivering Virtue* concerns morality and religion. Rain simply doesn't understand why some things are morally justifiable, while other seemingly like things are not. Who makes the rules, he wonders? And why do I have to follow them? The humor and drama in the book come in large part from Rain wrestling with this confusion.

- You tend to pick on religion in this book. At times you're downright irreverent.

With a religion behind you, you can justify any number of horrible acts. History is rife with examples. Religions are also exclusive, eliminating or de-spiritualizing anyone who doesn't conform to whatever version of salvation they're offering. So, no, I'm not so keen on religion, and I guess that comes out in my book. But the thing all religions are based upon – that spiritual purity and virtue – I respect that immensely. Probably more than anything. I just think when humanity gets involved, with its many worldly agendas, that purity gets a little muddled. I try to stay true to the purity underlying religion, that spiritual aspect upon which it is based, and through which we're all connected.

- At times, Rain seems to represent the worst in America's westward expansion. He even feels himself to be the "Dark Angel" causing everyone so much grief. At other times, he's the Savior.

Yes, and yes. He's the embodiment of both those things. His hungers reflect those of all the whites invading the land. And yet he also wants to escape that feeding frenzy. He can't wait to leave Independence behind. "It always felt good," he says, "to part ways with streets and buildings and vile humanity in trade for open and unsullied country." At one point, he decides to leave the main westward route of the settlers and set off on his own through the wilderness. He feels more at home there. That's where he finds and falls in love with Turtle Dove, the Indian widow. Rain finds something beautiful in the wild lands of the west, but by his nature, he can't help but ruin it.

- The ending of *Delivering Virtue* is surprising and mysterious. Do you think readers will get it?

The book is told in first person, through the sensibilities of a man wanting to do the right thing, but who is unsure what exactly that is. Didier Rain spends the entire book making mistakes, thinking them over, making new mistakes and so on and so forth. In the end, he's faced with a decision. Where does Virtue – this very pure, angelic girl ultimately belong? It's his moment of truth. If I've done my work as a writer, I've put the reader in Rain's shoes. With him, we piece together all of the clues we've been given along the route of this arduous journey. With him, we make that final decision concerning Virtue based on faith. I think Rain's a little baffled himself, but he feels in his heart that he's chosen the right ending. He has learned to trust that he is being guided by the underlying mystery and magic of the cosmos. Hopefully readers will feel that same sense of rightness, even if they don't absolutely, one hundred percent "get it."

