Joe Meno is a fiction writer and playwright who lives in Chicago. He is the winner of the Nelson Algren Literary Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Great Lakes Book Award, and a finalist for the Story Prize. He is the editor of Chicago Noir: The Classics and the author of two short story collections and multiple novels including the best sellers Hairstyles of the Damned, The Boy Detective Fails, and Office Girl. He is a professor in the Department of Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago.

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The white mare appeared on a Monday. Neither the grandfather nor the grandson had any idea who’d sent it. At first there was only the violent agitation of the pickup as it rattled along the unmarked road, towing behind it a fancy silver trailer, all ten wheels upsetting the air with a cloud of dust high as a steeple. The grandfather raised his hand to his eyes to try to make out the shape of the thing coming. It was a late afternoon in mid-July and the sun had just begun to falter behind the hills and tree line. The black pickup with its out-of-town plates bounced through the gate then pulled to a stop near the corner of the bleachy henhouse. Every bird on the farm, all the Silver Sussex roosters, all the Maran hens, turned to face the commotion with a prehistoric silence, waiting for the grit to begin to settle. When a man with sunglasses like a state trooper pulled himself out from behind the truck’s wheel, stretching his legs from what appeared to have been a long trip, Jim asked him what it was about. The man had a clipboard and some papers which he asked Jim to sign, in triplicate, before leading him around to the back of the trailer. There he handed Jim a pink sheet of paper and pair of silver keys. The horse, sleek-looking even behind steel
bars, huffed through its pink nostrils, disappearing back into the darkness.

“It’s yours,” the man said.

“Mine?”

“Yours.”

“But . . . but what for?” Jim asked.

The man with the sunglasses shrugged, itched his nose, and said, “I just get paid to deliver it,” then he put away his ink pen and began to unhook the trailer from the pickup’s hitch. It seemed the trailer had also been bequeathed, though Jim still did not know from whom. The man with the sunglasses handed another pink piece of paper to Jim, stepped clear of a mud puddle, and climbed back inside the cab of the pickup.

“But there’s been some kind of mistake,” the grandfather said.

The man readjusted his dark sunglasses, lit a cigarette, exhaled—the smoke rising in twin, nearly invisible tendrils about his craggy face—and looked down at the clipboard and said, “This the right address?”

Jim nodded.

“You Jim Falls?”

The grandfather nodded again.

“No mistake.” The man scowled and gave the ignition a start.

“By the way, it’s got a name. Right here,” the man said, pointing to the pink page. Then the black pickup was pulling away, was driving off, then was gone. Jim walked over to the rear of the trailer. The horse was turning back and forth before him with an air of expectancy, the old man and the horse like children then, hesitant at their parents’ ankles, waiting to meet. The grandfather had never been fond of horses; there had been a pair of mules his father had borrowed to plow furrows for the corn, but those days were long gone.

The hired hand, Rodrigo, had always claimed to have been raised on a horse ranch. Without so much as a word, he set down a Maran rooster, stepped up to the trailer, unlocked the bar, opened the gate, and slowly led the horse down the ramp. He whistled
through his front teeth once the animal was standing there in the full sun where they could take in its shape.

“It’s a racehorse, Mister Jim,” Rodrigo grinned, patting its sleek flanks, then looking under, apprising its sex. “And a lady.”

Jim reached out a tentative hand in the horse’s direction, feeling the humid moistness of the animal’s nose, placing his palm against its neck. Its ears flicked, the blue-black eye staring back, expressionless. In its stoicism, in its stony quiet, the grandfather saw what he most often loved about the land, the country, the world. It was enough to say he had not nor would never have dreamt of standing this close to a horse on this day or any other, and the unexpectedness, the absolute un-reason of the animal’s arrival, is what gave the grandfather a sense of joy.

“What you going to call her, Mister Jim?” came Rodrigo’s voice.

The grandfather studied the animal’s shape, tried to take in its perfect, imperturbable appearance, and then, looking down at the pink paper, he said, “It says here her name’s John the Baptist.”

“John? For a lady?”

“Yes, John. For a lady. That’s what it says.”

“From the Bible?”

“I guess so.”

Rodrigo shrugged, and then searched inside the trailer and found an expensive eastern saddle and bridle. He whistled once again through his front teeth and then set to tack up, the horse remaining completely still as the blanket, then saddle was fit into place, then the bridle. It huffed once, not even a snort, and became silent again.

“You ride her, Mister Jim?”

Jim stared at the ghostly creature, at its formidable stature, and shook his head with a frown. “Not in this life, buster.”

Rodrigo shrugged his shoulders again, holding the leather reins in his hand, asking a serious question by raising his eyebrows slightly.

By then the boy—having heard the unfamiliar pickup rambling back down the gravel drive—walked out of the house and stared at
the animal suspiciously. He stood a dozen feet away, pushing his
glasses up against his face, trying to decide if this interruption was
going to be worth his time. “Whose horse is that?” he asked.
“Fella said it’s ours.”
“Ours?”
“Mine, I guess.”
“But what for?”
“He didn’t say.”

The horse gave a soft whinny, which would have gone unheard
if it wasn’t for the open air of the farm and the nearby highway—
quiet at this time of day.

Rodrigo pulled lightly on the reins, turned to face Jim once
again, a daring smile crossing the farmhand’s face, the question
having already been answered, in his mind at least, awaiting a sign,
which Jim gave without begrudgement, nodding in a curt manner.

“Okay,” Rodrigo said, slipping his left boot into the silver stir-
rup, then pulling himself up and fitting in his right. The horse took
no notice of the stranger upon its back, its nostrils flaring slightly, its
tail alighting back and forth, until the lean-faced man gave a short,
gentle kick and the horse, as if having heard some celestial trum-
pet, was off, bucking and rearing in a flash of dust and dirt, clearing
the low wire chicken fence, wreaking havoc in the dry-looking field
of corn. Before the man on its back could whisper, “Whoa, whoa,
whoa,” the animal seemed to have made one full pass of the entire
property, galloping breakneck alongside the culvert, its hide speck-
led with sunlight.

“Good God,” was all the grandfather could get out.

It was clear from the first that the horse had been bred as a racer;
standing fifteen hands high, it was lean-muscled with long legs, the
hindquarters a rig of fibrous muscle. Four years old, it looked as spry
as a filly.

By the time Rodrigo had slowed the animal down to a canter,
then a trot, then was heeling the horse before them, the farmhand’s
face had lost none of its expression. There was a wide smile frozen
below his black mustache, creeping from one ear to the other, his
dark eyes runny with tears.

The boy hung behind the fence apprehensively, excited by the
creature’s presence, but too frightened to get closer.

Jim, on the other hand, felt a weakness well up in him. He care-
fully strode over to the animal, slowly raising his hand to the side of
its broad neck, and then he began to pat it, in ever-widening circles,
the horse breathing huskily, its blue-black eye momentarily lidded
by the longest eyelashes Jim had ever seen on an animal. It felt like
the horse was the answer to something. He had an ache just then, not
in his joints nor his stomach nor his liver, and remembered the place
where he had been struck one afternoon when catching sight of the
back of his wife Deedee’s knees as she stood on a chair and reached
to retrieve a box from the top shelf of the school supply closet where
she was teaching. He put his hand over his chest now, wondering if
this is what it was like to get hit by lightning.

“Do we get to keep it?” the boy asked.

“I don’t know,” Jim said.

The horse turned before them and snorted. Jim gave an easy
smile.

“But where’s it gonna live?”

“We’ll see.”

The boy held out a hand and patted the horse’s flank.

Later it was decided they would drive to the nearby hamlet of
Mount Holly the following morning and make an appointment to
see Jim Northfield, the former lawyer and judge.
Marvel and a Wonder
A novel by Joe Meno
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Contact: Sheryl Johnston | SHERYLJOHNSTON@AOL.COM | tel. 773-472-2254
Publisher Contact: Susannah Lawrence | AKASHIC BOOKS | SUSANNAH@AKASHICBOOKS.COM | tel. 718-643-9193

Grandfather and grandson must journey into the underworld of the American Midwest in search of both courage and redemption.

Praise for Marvel and a Wonder

"Faulkner-ian epic for the contemporary age . . . . The novel’s prose is marvelous is its spare, convincing grit while the story’s themes of family, redemption, sacrifice, and faith echo the plays of Sam Shepard at times . . . . A grandiose, atmospheric portrait of Middle America in all its damaged glory."
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—Dan Chaon, author of Await Your Reply

About Marvel and a Wonder

Marvel and a Wonder is a darkly mesmerizing epic and literary page-turner set at the end of the twentieth century. In summer 1995, Jim Falls, a Korean War vet, struggles to raise his sixteen-year-old grandson, Quentin, on a farm in southern Indiana. In July, they receive a mysterious gift—a beautiful quarter horse—which upends the balance of their difficult lives. The horse’s appearance catches the attention of a pair of troubled, meth-dealing brothers and, after a violent altercation, the horse is stolen and sold. Grandfather and grandson must travel the landscape of the bleak heartland to reclaim the animal and to confront the ruthless party that has taken possession of it. Along the way, both will be forced to face the misperceptions and tragedies of their past.

Evoking the writing of William Faulkner and Denis Johnson, this brilliant, deeply moving work explores the harrowing, often beautiful marvels of a nation challenged by its own beliefs. Ambitious, expansive, and laden with suspense, Marvel and a Wonder presents an unforgettable pair of protagonists at the beginning of one America and the end of another.

About Joe Meno

Joe Meno is a fiction writer and playwright who lives in Chicago. He is the winner of the Nelson Algren Literary Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Great Lakes Book Award, and a finalist for the Story Prize. He is the editor of Chicago Noir: The Classics and the author of two short story collections and multiple novels including the best sellers Hairstyles of the Damned, The Boy Detective Fails, and Office Girl. He is a professor in the Department of Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago.

Also by Joe Meno

Office Girl
The Boy Detective Fails
Hairstyles of the Damned
How the Hula Girl Sings
Demons in the Spring (stories)
“An off-kilter romance doubles as an art movement in Joe Meno’s novel. The novel reads as a parody of art-school types . . . and as a tribute to their devil-may-care spirit. Meno impressively captures post-adolescent female angst and insecurity. Fresh and funny, the images also encapsulate the mortification, confusion and excitement that define so many 20-something existences.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Wonderful storytelling panache . . . Odile is a brash, moody, likable young woman navigating the obstacles of caddish boyfriends and lousy jobs, embarking on the sort of sentimental journey that literary heroines have been making since Fanny Burney’s Evelina in the 1770s. Tenderhearted Jack is the awkward, quiet sort that the women in Jane Austen’s novels overlook until book’s end. He is obsessed with tape-recording Chicago’s ambient noises so that he can simulate the city in the safety of his bedroom, ‘a single town he has invented made of nothing but sound.’ Mr. Meno excels at capturing the way that budding love can make two people feel brave and freshly alive to their surroundings . . . the story of the relationship has a sweet simplicity.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“In Joe Meno’s new novel, set in the last year of the 20th century, art school dropout Odile Neff and amateur sound artist Jack Blevins work deadening office jobs; gush about indie rock, French film, and obscure comic book artists; and gradually start a relationship that doubles as an art movement. They are, in other words, the 20-something doyens of pop culture and their tale of promiscuous roommates, on-again/off-again exes, and awkward sex is punctuated on the page by cute little doodles, black and white photographs (of, say, a topless woman in a Stormtrooper mask), and monologues that could easily pass for Belle & Sebastian lyrics (“It doesn’t pay to be a dreamer because all they really want you to do is answer the phone”).”

—*Publishers Weekly* (Pick of the Week)

“Meno has constructed a snowflake-delicate inquiry into alienation and longing. Illustrated with drawings and photographs and shaped by tender empathy, buoyant imagination, and bittersweet wit, this wistful, provocative, off-kilter love story affirms the bonds forged by art and story.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“The talented Chicago-based Meno has composed a gorgeous little indie romance, circa 1999 . . . When things Get Weird as things do when we’re young, Meno is refreshingly honest in portraying lowest lows and not just the innocent highs. A sweetheart of a novel, complete with a hazy ending.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Along with PBRs, flannels, and thick-framed glasses, this Millennial Franny and Zooey is an instant hipster staple. Plot notes: It’s 1999 and Odile and Jack are partying like it was . . . well, you know. Meno’s alternative titles help give the gist: Bohemians or Young People on Bicycles Doing Troubling Things. Cross-media: Drawings and Polaroids provide a playful, quirky element.”

—*Marie Claire*
PRAISE FOR THE GREAT PERHAPS

- Winner of the 2009 Great Lakes Book Award
- A New York Times Book Review Editor’s Choice
- A Booktrust Best Book of the Year

“Meno is thinking hard about why the world is the way it is and about where hope for change might reasonably lie. For most of the last decade, a lot of prominent fiction writers interested in establishing their realist bona fides, the relevance of their work to the way we live now, seemed to feel they had no choice but to incorporate 9/11. But Meno dares to consign it, and our response to it, to a larger historical and spiritual context, and even to suggest that there is nothing new under the sun. A few years ago that might have seemed heretical, but traditionally such farsightedness is part of a novelist’s job.”

—New York Times Book Review

“Laugh-out-loud funny but frequently sad, Joe Meno’s new novel runs the gamut of emotions and techniques as it depicts a Chicago family in turmoil . . . They achieve no earth-shattering insights, and neither does the author; he simply reminds us with wit and compassion that the human condition is “both astonishing and quite ordinary.”

—Chicago Tribune

“The Great Perhaps is a darkly funny, lyrical, and shrewdly observant chronicle of a family on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Joe Meno has the rare ability to evoke mid-life melancholy and teenage angst with equal authority.”

—Tom Perrotta, author of Election and The Abstinence Teacher

“I think The Great Perhaps is the wisest, most humane and transcendent novel on the contemporary family since The Corrections . . . A marvelous book.”

—Irvine Welsh, author of Trainspotting

“This postmodern portrait of an eccentric family delivers equal parts humor and heartbreak, raising questions about love, identity and faith.”

—San Francisco Chronicle

“Meno’s fifth book manages to mix all-too-real scenes from family life with disturbingly surreal episodes, the whole underscored by the undefined guilt and anxiety that are ever present in developed Western society. Not to be missed.”

—Daily Mail

“A terrible fear of clouds, an obscure search for giant squid and a bomb-building teenage girl: Joe Meno has imagination, humor and the rare ability to make characters seem as near as your own family—sometimes almost too close for comfort. An intriguing and heartfelt book.”

—Lydia Millet, author of How the Dead Dream

“Meno’s distinctively imaginative and compassionate fiction is forged at the intersection of ordinariness and astonishment... Tender, funny, spooky, and gripping, Meno’s novel encompasses a subtle yet devastating critique of war; sensitively traces the ripple effect of a dark legacy of nebulosity, guilt, and fear; and evokes both heartache and wonder.”

—Booklist (starred review)
ALSO FROM JOE MENO

CHICAGO NOIR: THE CLASSICS edited by Joe Meno
Nelson Algren, Richard Wright, and Patricia Highsmith are just three of the iconic authors included in this outstanding volume.

OFFICE GIRL by Joe Meno
Trade Paperback | $15.95 | ISBN: 9781617750762
Hardcover | $24.95 | ISBN: 9781617750755
“Fresh and funny, the images also encapsulate the mortification, confusion and excitement that define so many 20-something existences.”
—The New York Times Book Review

HAIRSTYLES OF THE DAMNED by Joe Meno
“Sensitive, well-observed, often laugh-out-loud funny . . . You won’t regret a moment of the journey.”
—Chicago Tribune

THE BOY DETECTIVE FAILS by Joe Meno
Trade Paperback Original | $15.95 | ISBN: 9781933354101
“This is postmodern fiction with a head and a heart, addressing such depressing issues as suicide, death, loneliness, failure, anomie, and guilt with compassion, humor, and even whimsy. Meno’s best work yet; highly recommended.”
—Library Journal (starred review)

DEMONS IN THE SPRING stories by Joe Meno
Trade Paperback Original | $17.95 | ISBN: 9781936070091
Hardcover | $24.95 | ISBN: 9781933354477
“An inspired collection of twenty stories, brilliant in its command of tone and narrative perspective . . . Creativity and empathy mark the collection . . . Illustrations enhance the already vivid storytelling.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

HOW THE HULA GIRL SINGS by Joe Meno
“Meno has a poet’s feel for small-town details, life in the joint, and the trials an ex-con faces, and he’s a natural storyteller with a talent for characterization . . . A likable winner that should bolster Meno’s reputation.”
—Publishers Weekly

TENDER AS HELLFIRE by Joe Meno
“Tender As Hellfire features some of the liveliest characters that one is apt to meet in a contemporary novel. Vividly described . . . Meno’s passionate new voice makes him a writer to watch.”
—Publishers Weekly