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## One Writer's Brooklyn: Chronicles of Crime, Boombox Abuse and Divorce



Casey Kelbaugh for The New York Times

Gabriel Cohen, a Brooklyn author, will have published three books — a literary novel, a crime novel and a memoir about his divorce — in the span of a year.

By MICHAEL WILSON  
Published: February 6, 2008

An Italian woman tends her garden in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, and worries about her neighbor, an increasingly sullen black teenager, all the while arguing with her bigoted mother.

A neighborhood and a world away, two buddies fishing in Red Hook recoil at a horrible sight bobbing in the water: a little coffin.

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[A Review of "Red Hook," by Gabriel Cohen \(December 9, 2001\)](#)

And back in Boerum Hill, a wife walks out of her apartment without a goodbye or a note, never to return, leaving her

husband to try to figure out what destroyed their marriage.

Taken in one dose, these three tales sound like plotlines from an overwrought doorstop of a novel. But they are the first chapters of three new books by the Brooklyn author Gabriel Cohen.

At this time last year, Mr. Cohen, 46, had one published book to his name, "Red Hook," a detective novel from 2001. After a six-year dry spell, he has hit on a writer's hat trick: three books in three genres from three publishers, all reaching the shelves within a year.

"The publishing world wants to fit you into some kind of niche," Mr. Cohen said recently on a short drive past the settings of his books. "You're a crime writer, you're a science writer, whatever. I'm passionate about a lot of different things."

The first of the three books was "Boombox," released in May by Academy Chicago Publishers, a literary novel inspired by frustrations experienced on his block in Boerum Hill. The second, "The Graving Dock," was more commercial, a sequel to his crime novel that Thomas Dunne Books/St.

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Martin's Minotaur published in November. The third, due on March 1, is the most personal and quietly startling: "Storms Can't Hurt the Sky: A Buddhist Path Through Divorce" (DaCapo), an account of the end of Mr. Cohen's marriage.

"It was the worst thing that ever happened to me," he writes. "What I learned astonished me: that change and loss are inevitable, but that the suffering we derive from them is not."

As different as the books may seem, Mr. Cohen sees a common thread. "Ultimately, all of them are mysteries," he said. "Obviously, the crime novel is a mystery. 'Boombbox' is a mystery about why it's so hard for people to get along."

Even "Storms," he said, is a mystery: "On a very specific day in 2005, my marriage fell apart. Why did that happen? And that opened up into a deeper mystery. Why are romantic relationships so difficult?"

Mr. Cohen was born in Austin, Tex., and lived in Afghanistan and Rio de Janeiro as a boy, while his father helped train elementary schoolteachers, before settling in Washington. After attending [Wesleyan University](#) in Connecticut and stints in a rock band and at a weekly newspaper, Mr. Cohen moved to New York, taking day jobs to get by. (He has in recent years written occasionally for the City section of The New York Times.)

He wound up in Boerum Hill on Wyckoff Street, where today about the biggest threat on the sidewalk is having your foot run over by a baby stroller. But back in 1989 the block was more dangerous. "I'd hear gunshots at night," he said outside his old apartment. "I got mugged on this block."

He was writing a novel there in 1991 when what he called a "writer's nightmare" began: a teenage neighbor bought a club-size public-address system and began blasting gangsta rap in the courtyard. "I tried talking to him and his mother," Mr. Cohen said. "She told me, 'This isn't Westchester.'"

Though eventually the neighbors organized and went to the police, he said, "for several months I just kept struggling with that." Then he decided to write about it, creating "Boombbox" from the real situation but with fictitious characters.

He didn't sell the book to a publisher, and began writing another, a crime novel, "Red Hook." It was nominated for best first novel by the Mystery Writers of America and praised by critics. "There's a documentary panache to his depiction of Brooklyn and its history," Mark Rozzo wrote in The Los Angeles Times, citing "an acutely rendered sense of consequence, of the way criminal acts — and personal histories — radiate to affect entire communities."

At about that time Mr. Cohen had begun a whirlwind, long-distance romance with the woman he calls Claire in "Storms Can't Hurt the Sky." She moved to Brooklyn on Sept. 1, 2001 ("Welcome to New York," he writes in "Storms"), and they married in 2003. But the news that their building was being sold led to a series of brutal fights about new neighborhoods and apartments, Mr. Cohen said, and counseling brought no relief.

What helped — though it was too late for his marriage — was Buddhism. His interest began with a flier advertising a Buddhist lecture in Park Slope. Though, he said, he feared something "dopey," he attended: "The talk just blew me away. It was so much about what I was going through." Buddhism gave him tools to deal with his anger, he said, aids to recovering from his divorce.

Mr. Cohen pulled "Boombbox" out of the drawer and found a publisher. After a first attempt at a "Red Hook" sequel failed to gel, his second try came together. And he realized he had another book in him. "Storms Can't Hurt the Sky" is part memoir and part self-help book. It blends a frank examination of his marriage with equal parts enthusiastic introduction to Buddhist teachings and outsider's skepticism. Chapters have titles like "You Aren't My Sunshine" and "Does This Book Exist?"

His literary efforts extend to a monthly reading series he started in 2002 at Sunny's, an eclectic Red Hook bar where he invites New York writers to read from their books and essays.

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He has seen his ex-wife once since she moved out, he said, at her lawyer's office, and has not had contact with her in over a year. "If she reads the whole thing," he said, "I hope she sees this is not about me blaming her for what went wrong."

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