

A Conversation with Laurence Graham, author of HOHAs in Love

You recently published a novel entitled HOHAs in Love. That's an unusual title. What it's about?

It's a story about the Hoboken Harriers running club—or the HOHAs, as they are familiarly known—and the star-crossed relationships of its runners. On deeper levels, it is about the transience of our lives, our pursuit of dreams, and the meaning of love.

Why the Hoboken Harriers?

In the early and mid-1990s I ran regularly with the HOHAs. I was lonely, and I began to run with the HOHAs to meet new people. There were wonderful people in the club, characters of all types, and I came to think of the HOHAs as a second family. When that period of time came to an end—as all times do—I felt nostalgic for it, and I began the novel as an attempt to recapture that time and the warmth and love I felt for the club during those years.

Have you been involved with other running clubs?

When I was working in central New Jersey, I ran for several years with the Raritan Valley Road Runners, another wonderful club and group of people. I had the good fortune there to work with a great amateur coach, Dave Hoch, who taught me a lot about training and helped me improve my racing times. RVRR also has a national class master champion, Roger Price, and it was inspiring to run with him. RVRR has several other excellent runners, and they always field competitive teams. I mention them in the novel as one of the teams that competed with the HOHAs for the state cross country championship.

I also have been a member for many years of the New York Road Runners, one of the greatest running organizations in the world. I love their Central Park races, and their 10K loop of the park is one of the most exciting and challenging courses I have ever run. As Sinatra sang of New York, “If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.”

You write of Hoboken as the birthplace of Sinatra, one of our country's great dreamers. What is the importance of Hoboken in the novel?

Hoboken is central to the novel for just that reason: it is a birthplace of dreams. Hoboken is one of the few small towns that are recognized throughout America, not just because it is the birthplace of Sinatra and baseball, but because it was the launching point for thousands of immigrants and their dreams of a better life in America. The protagonist of the novel, Emmitt Bean, is an archetypal American dreamer, and I could think of no better place for him to weave his own dream with the dreams of others.

Emmitt Bean, as you write, was “the founder, first president, and coach of the Hoboken Harriers Running Club.” Is there a real Emmitt Bean?

The real founder of the Hoboken Harriers was Paul Peacock, and he was indeed the inspiration for Emmitt Bean. Paul is the greatest enthusiast and proponent of running that I have personally met. He was the HOHAs' George Sheehan and Fred Lebow rolled into one. And Paul was a much better runner than I made Emmitt out to be. Paul was once the New Jersey 800 meter champion in his age group.

I exaggerated characteristics of Emmitt Bean for comic affect, but Paul Peacock is everything that is wonderful about Emmitt Bean: his passion, enthusiasm, dedication, gregariousness, and commitment. Paul eventually left Hoboken and the HOHAs, as did Emmitt in the novel. I still miss him.

The cover of the novel states that “The lessons of running reveal the secrets of love.” What do you mean by that?

I've been a runner for over twenty years, and early on I realized that there is a lot to learn about running, that it is much more complex than it appears to be. To train well, I had to organize my time, get enough sleep, and improve my diet. To avoid injury, I had to learn stretching and strengthening exercises, pace myself, and make regular adjustments to my training plans. I had to be flexible, disciplined, persistent, and focused. And I learned that I couldn't just do all these things on my own; I had to take advantage of the knowledge of coaches and other runners, and I had to work with them to complete the harder training runs that are needed for success in racing.

And as I was learning to be a runner, and then to be a better runner, I saw the impact of these lessons on other parts of my life. I think that by becoming a better runner, we become a stronger person, and that strength helps us with all the other challenges of our lives. In the novel, the HOHAs are challenged by their relationships with other people, by their fateful love affairs, and they find the strength and wisdom they need to deal with these challenges in the very lessons they have learned from their running.

You've spoken before of dreams, and they play a big role in the novel. What do dreams mean to you?

I've always subscribed to Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, and I wanted to write about how we are all connected at that level. I think of dreams as our picture window into that unconscious world. We construct our reality at that unconscious level, dreaming it. The novel comprises four life stories, at first seemingly separate. As the novel unfolds, those stories come together, and we glimpse the connection that was always there. The stories are dreamt before they are realized, and when they are finally realized, we have a feeling that they always were.

What are your own dreams for HOHAs in Love?

I dream that runners will see *HOHAs in Love* as a love song to our sport and that it will enhance their appreciation for running. I dream that non-runners will learn about running and perhaps become runners themselves. And I dream that all readers will see in the characters of the novel our connectedness as human beings and know that all our individual dreams can come together as one.