



[Lisa you are an null level member.](#)

SUPPORT US

FREE NEWSLETTER

ARTS

Local author James Markert publishes fourth novel set in the Dust Bowl

By [LISA HORNUNG](#) | June 28, 2018 5:45 am



Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm — Cimarron County, Okla., April 1936 | [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Dry land and awful dust storms caused thousands of people to flee the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles during the Dust Bowl. It's not the kind of setting you'd usually want in a novel, but Louisville author [James Markert](#) sees bleak times as great settings for stories.

His book, "[What Blooms From Dust: A Novel](#)," hit shelves on Tuesday. And Markert is having a release party on Friday, June 29, at [3rd Turn Brewing](#), 10408 Watterson Trail, starting at 7 p.m.

While researching for "[The Angel's Share](#)," his Depression-era novel that came out two years ago, he read a bit about the Dust Bowl, a severe drought in the high plains in the 1930s, where the dry land was lifted by strong winds, creating extreme dust storms.

James Markert | Courtesy

The constant dust and dirt in the air was breathed in by residents and was particularly deadly to the elderly and infants. Markert was inspired by another book, "The Worst Hard Time," by Timothy Egan, which tells the nonfiction version of the story.

While John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" tells the story of a family who left the Dust Bowl, Markert wanted to explore the lives of those who stayed.

"I've taken a lot of bleak times in history, and (I like) finding some kind of beauty beneath it, and I'm thinking, I don't think you can take too much of a darker time than the Dust Bowl," he told Insider. "Finding something kind of good and what hope I can find out of that."

'What Blooms From Dust'

Jeremiah Goodbye, the main character, has just escaped death row in mid-electrocution by "Old Sparky." A tornado hit the prison, and Goodbye escaped, heading home to Nowhere, Okla., with one bullet destined for his twin brother, Josiah. The family drama plays out between the two brothers, their father and Josiah's wife, Ellen.

"When I started, I didn't know where I was going," Markert said. "I just thought of Jeremiah Goodbye just out of prison. ... With this one, I wanted a protagonist you just didn't know

about. So he's just out of prison on death row, and how are we going to like this guy?"

While reading Egan's book, Markert came upon the name of an actual Dust Bowl survivor, Charles Goodnight, and he liked the name. So, Goodbye became the name of the family who braves the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression and tries to survive in a place abandoned by others.

Other names in the book — Maverick, Rose, Craven and more — add a touch of levity to the story.

The town endures "Black Sunday," a real life massive dust storm that occurred on April 14, 1935. It is believed to have displaced 300 million tons of topsoil. But the Goodbye family and the residents of Nowhere find that the storm has had an unusual effect on them, which you'll have to read to find out. No spoilers here.

Markert likes to add magical realism to his stories, and in "What Blooms," Markert found a way to inject a dose of humor in an otherwise dreary place.

"I wanted to bring a little bit of humor, though it's not a comedy," he said. "Funny things happen in dire times."



The Dust Bowl, a devastating drought followed by near-constant dust storms, buried homes in the high plains in the 1930s. | Wikimedia Commons

Markert's process

Markert has bachelor's and master's degrees in history from the University of Louisville, so he enjoys reading about the past already. But he wasn't much of a reader until his upper class years at De Sales High School.

He had a teacher, Roger Eppinger, who instead of making the students read the classics, had them read Stephen King books.

"So we read 'The Shawshank Redemption,' 'The Body,' then that got the kids engaged, and we discussed it," Markert said. "It got me reading. I read every Stephen King book after that, then went on to Dean Koontz and John Grisham, and I've been reading ever since. Once I fell in love with reading and stories, I thought, 'I'm going to try this.' "

But he didn't see instant success. He wrote four novels over 12 years that didn't get published before his first one, "[A White Wind Blew](#)," about tuberculosis at Waverly Hills Sanatorium, was published in 2013.

Since then, he's published "The Angels' Share" in 2017, and "[All Things Bright and Strange](#)" in January 2018. His next novel, "[Midnight at the Tuscany Hotel](#)," is coming out April 2019.

"When I finish a book, I might take a month off of writing, but I get antsy," he said. "At this pace, you're thinking of one, you're writing one, you're editing one, and you're marketing the one that's out. I'm working on three different books right now."

His day job as a tennis pro fills in the gaps as needed, but now that he's found success as a writer, he can ease up on the coaching.

His next book, "Midnight in the Tuscany Hotel," is set in post-World War II in a Tuscany-themed hotel in Southern California. It was once a haven for artists, but now it's full of Alzheimer's patients. They learn that drinking from the courtyard fountain can restore their memory, "but everything isn't as perfect as it seems with the water," he said.

You'll have to wait until next year to find out why.

LISA HORNUNG

Lisa Hornung a native of Louisville and has worked in local media for more than 15 years as a writer and editor. Before

that she worked as a writer, editor and photographer for community newspapers in Kansas, Ohio and Kentucky. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Georgia, and after a 20-year career in journalism, she obtained a master's degree in history from Eastern Kentucky University in 2016.



**Institute for
Nonprofit News**

Copyright © 2019 Insider Media Group, Inc., All Rights Reserved.