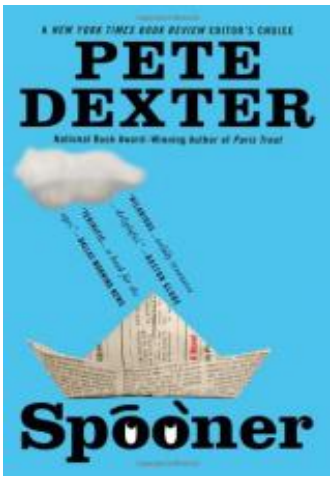
Spooner

by Pete Dexter



About the Book

Warren Spooner was born after a prolonged delivery in a makeshift delivery room in a doctor's office in Milledgeville, Georgia, on the first Saturday of December, 1956. His father died shortly afterward, long before Spooner had even a memory of his face, and was replaced eventually by a once-brilliant young naval officer, Calmer Ottosson, recently court-martialed out of service. This is the story of the lifelong tie between the two men, poles apart, of Spooner's troubled childhood, troubled adolescence, violent and troubled adulthood and Calmer Ottosson's inexhaustible patience, undertaking a life-long struggle to salvage his step-son, a man he will never understand.

Discussion Guide

1. Warren Spooner?s birth ?had the history of the South stamped all over it.? How do geography and setting shape Spooner? Would his story have played out differently if he and his family didn?t move to the different locations where they ended up?

2. From the moment he is born, Spooner can?t seem to surpass second best. His deceased twin Clifford was ?forever, secretly, the favorite child,? his sister Margaret was ?half a foot taller, twice as fast, twice as smart, and as far as he knew had been born knowing how to read,? younger brothers Darrow and Phillip are both intelligent, and he can?t even catch a break with his own dog: ?It was supposed to be Spooner?s dog, but like everybody else it preferred Margaret?s company.? Does Spooner seem as aware of this fact as the narrator is? If he knows, how does he react to it? Do Calmer, Lily, or any of his siblings realize his supposed inferiority in this ?exceptional? family?

3. Lily appears to be perpetually unhappy throughout the story. From the first scene of the book when she gave birth to Spooner to the Metcalfs? new den, and from Tinker?s column to Calmer?s demotion, she seems constantly on the brink of a meltdown, or at least an asthma attack. Consider the following observation: Spooner?s mother lived her life with the certain knowledge that the whole thing --- cradle to grave --- was an ambush. Spooner didn?t necessarily disagree with

that, but had never seen any reason to take it personally. The incident about to occur, for instance, would wind up in the archives as one more piece of evidence that the world was out to ruin her. How did Lily?s outlook on life affect Spooner? Calmer? Do you think anything could have been done to change her mind about whether ?the world was out to ruin her ??

4. How are the authority figures in the story (Toebox, Tinker, Cowhurl, Gilman, Spooner?s doctor, the deputy sheriff) portrayed? Does this reflect Spooner?s view of authority, or is the omniscient narrator of a different opinion from the book?s characters?

5. Calmer is a man of rules and reason, playing number pattern games with the children and always finding repairs to be made --- ?if a thing had moving parts, he could find a logic behind the movement, and when it broke, he would see how to fix it.? Spooner, on the other hand, is a creator of chaos, and as a boy, ?often shivered in the aftermath of breaking one of the rules and getting away with it.? He found ways to get his kindergarten teacher to give him a shampoo, stole into houses as the fiend of Vincent Heights, and sought out a fight in Devil?s Pocket after he?d already insulted one of their own and gotten beaten once. How do the two men get through their lives with their different ideas of order/disorder? How do these contrasting outlooks keep them apart? How do they draw them together?

6. From a young age, Spooner seems to possess an understanding of reality that blends the pessimism of his mother with the acceptance of his stepfather: ?He was four years old, and nothing he?d seen so far indicated that the world was a forgive-and-forget sort of proposition.? How do the other people in his life respond to Spooner?s attitude? Do you think a more community-minded point of view or a more active position in the events around him have changed anything?

7. Besides the vocal lamentations of his mother, Spooner notes that emotions, whether they were affection or discord, were rarely shown in his household: ?He never heard anything playful going on and did not expect to. Spooner was fairly sure that people like his mother and Calmer had more important things on their minds,? and there was an ?understanding between Lily and Calmer never to have cross words with each other in front of the children. Somewhere, somehow, it had been decided that parental conflict wasn?t good for children?s development,? Calmer telling young Spooner that ?men don?t hold hands.? Why is this hiding of feelings so important for Lily? Calmer? Spooner? How does it affect relations between the three, particularly Spooner and Calmer at the end of Calmer?s life?

8. Our main character is almost always referred to by his last name. Spooner?s second wife and their child are never named at all, despite the fact that they are the only human beings that Spooner loves both openly and wholeheartedly. How do names (or the lack thereof) affect the reader?s perception of relationships in this story? Were these naming decisions Spooner?s choice, the narrator?s choice, or are the two choosers one and the same?

9. Although Spooner was accepting of the changes in his life (?He had always taken it for granted that anything that fell into his lap would also fall through his lap, sooner or later.?), he was often marked by anxiety. As a boy he felt a weight upon him that drove him to an anthill, after getting beaten in Devil?s Pocket he felt as though he were being flushed down a toilet, and in Whidby Island he begins throwing up with unnatural regularity. How can a man be at once tolerant of change and violently worried about it? What would Calmer?s solution be? Lily?s? Mrs. Spooner?s?

10. Young Spooner finally finds something he truly excels at (that is also socially acceptable) when he begins pitching in baseball games, but it has mixed results for Spooner. When his mother declared his grades too low and bans him from playing, he felt ?relieved.? Calmer then arranged for Spooner to be able to continue, making what Spooner knew was a

real sacrifice to his mother: ?Just those words, and then [Calmer] got up and left. And Jesus knew what that had cost him with her.? His enormous bonus check ?stunned? Lily, but left Spooner feeling ?as if he were being watched like a mouse in those first moments in the terrarium, before it sees the snake.? Finally, of course, Spooner?s elbow is shattered during practice, causing him pain and difficulty for the rest of his life. Do you think Spooner had any regrets about pursuing baseball? Why or why not? Would he have stayed with it if he knew the prices he?d have to pay? How would Calmer feel if he had known?

11. About a dozen years pass between Spooner?s elbow injury and his train ride to Philadelphia in the following chapter. What was the effect of skipping over this block of time, especially in light of the detail with which we followed Spooner?s childhood? How does Spooner change, or not change, with the passage of years? Would the young boy we met at the beginning of the book have recognized the older man at the end?

12. Describe Spooner?s friendship with Stanley Faint. The men are so different --- ?Spooner not only unsure of himself as a novelist, but at the bottom of things not even sure he was good enough to write a column for the Daily News, and Stanley believing heart and soul that he was the next heavyweight champion of the world? --- yet they are close enough that Stanley walks into danger for Spooner?s sake. What is it that ties them together so strongly?

13. Shortly after Spooner?s surgery with the botched anesthesia, we learn, ?By his own estimate, it was now the second half of Spooner?s life?the hard fact that his point of view had been altered, and there was no going back to the way things had looked before.? In addition to the considerable physical changes, how has Spooner been altered after his injuries?

14. Spooner forges a close relationship with Lester, old Dodge?s dog. We learn that he has a true respect for the dog: ?Spooner found himself in awe, not just of the animal?s appetite, but of his lack of inhibition. Of being so comfortable with who he was.? Never one to follow rules or dwell on other people?s expectations, why would Spooner so admire the ease of being completely oneself? How has Spooner had or not had this luxury?

15. Spooner is arguably centered on the love and the disconnection between a man and his stepfather: But if time running out made things sweeter, it also worked another direction, and Spooner, a man by now of some reputation for going his own way, who had over the years taken pretty dramatic steps to be seen that way, craved the good opinion of his stepfather more than he could ever admit, and felt the chance to fi nd out where he stood with him slipping away. Limited by an unspoken rule of hiding overt emotions, the men use indirect means to show their care for one another, no matter how frustrating. Do you think that each understood the other?s love fully before Calmer died? As desperate as Spooner feels in the above passage, why can he still not just tell Calmer how important he is to him, even when they are completely alone?

Author Bio

Pete Dexter is the author of the National Book Award winner **Paris Trout**and of **God's Pocket, Deadwood, Brotherly Love**, and **The Paperboy**. He was born in Michigan and raised in Georgia, Illinois, and eastern South Dakota. He lives on Puget Sound, Washington.

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