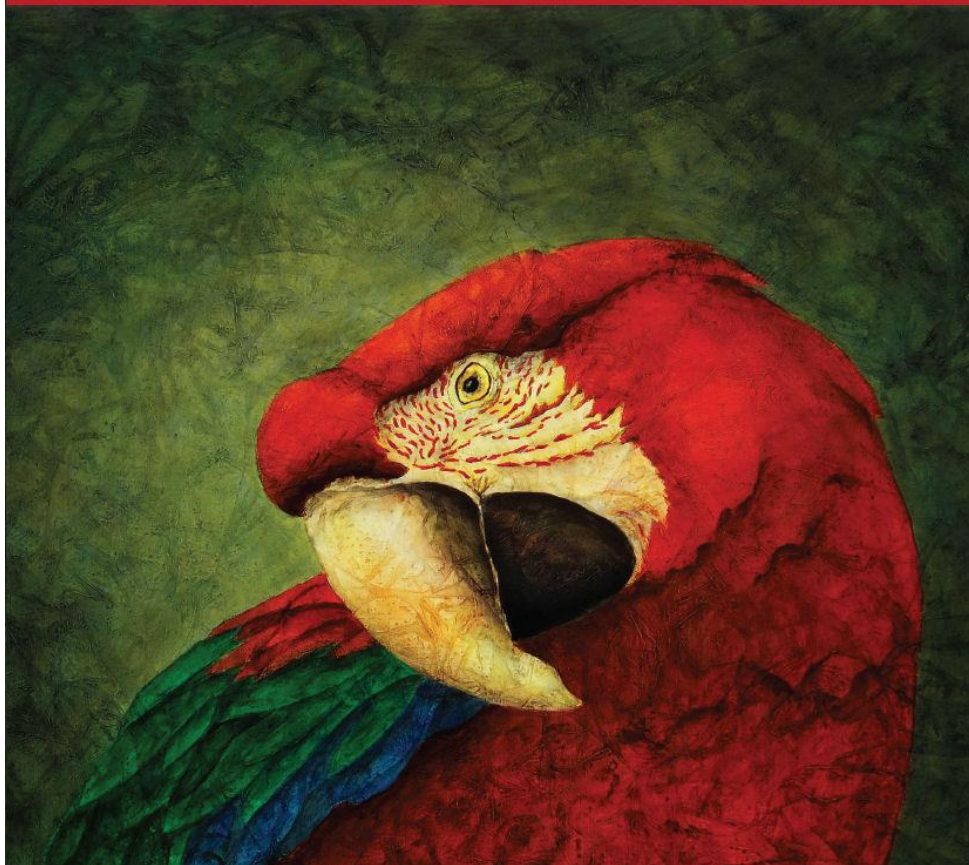


# What Happened Here

a novella & stories

**Bonnie ZoBell**



## **Reading Group Guide**

ISBN: 978-1-941209-00-4; 9 x 6 inch paperback, 192 pages, \$17.95

**Selected Praise for  
WHAT HAPPENED HERE  
by Bonnie ZoBell**

“...**wonderful**...ZoBell provides a rare glimpse into the myriad ways that shared tragedy can touch a community and the individuals who live there. **The eleven stories in *What Happened Here* present us with a cast of fascinating, flawed, and luminous characters as we walk with them through the wreckage toward hope, regrowth, and hard-won truth.**”—*Bookslut*, from Mary Aker’s introduction to her interview with Bonnie ZoBell

“In clear, lucid prose, *What Happened Here* evokes a haunting sense of place—calling up a California you don’t often read about, with Californians you don’t often meet.”  
—[Lionel Shriver](#), author of [Big Brother: A Novel](#)  
and [We Need to Talk about Kevin](#), winner of the Orange Prize.

**“Not since John Updike has a writer treated with such tenderness the raw vulnerability of what it means to be human.”**  
—*Boston Literary Magazine*

“Bonnie ZoBell’s luminously intersecting stories of artists, musicians, teachers and assorted shimmering misfits in a North Park neighborhood that happens to be the site of a historic plane wreck, beautifully chronicles the struggles of the living to survive—emotionally and physically—in the shadow of wreckage and ghosts. Her characters’ connections, madresses, kindnesses and demons are startlingly poignant and resonant.”  
—[Gina Frangelo](#), author of [A Life in Men: A Novel](#)

“...the crash and the questions of how to best process the emotions about it are a shadow in all of the short stories in ZoBell’s book. It is how the characters deal with the darkness that is cast and whether they decided to step out into the sunlight that makes each story so interesting...It’s a **tremendously well-written** take on trying to understand that which we can never know about what shapes a life, and in turn, the very work of being human.”  
—*The Rumpus*

“The individual pieces are all satisfying reads — it’s just that the way that the pieces come together strikes me as even more magical. *What Happened Here* is a **marvelous** collection and **I found myself wanting to reread it over and over to keep tracing both the literal and more symbolic links between the pieces.**”  
—*PANK Magazine*

**“...quite frankly, some of the best writing I’ve come across in a long while.”**  
—*The Small Press Review*

“The suggestion here is that it doesn't matter if the beast is real if we let the fear take over. ZoBell's characters are stuck in a queer kind of indeterminacy: They've been marked by catastrophic events beyond their comprehension, and although they know the way forward, they can't help but look back.”

—**Jim Ruland**, *San Diego City Beat*

“...*alluring*....What separates this collection from scores of other collections of short fiction is the individual strength of each story in the collection coupled with the inherent interconnectedness of all of them. Not only does the connectedness of the narratives create a greater, more satisfying narrative that transcends the sum of each particular story, but it also emphasizes the connectedness that the neighbors of North Park share in the much-later aftermath of the plane crash.”

—*JMWW Journal*

“**ZoBell's deep love and empathy for her characters is contagious**....The characters, especially the narrator, in “What Happened Here” have been masterfully developed.”

—*Necessary Fiction*

“Readers may argue over whether the greatest strength of Bonnie ZoBell's *What Happened Here* is the prize-winning prose or the full sympathy with which ZoBell gives life to her delightfully varied cast of characters (sour, sweet, canny, sexy, you name it; all of them linked by a gruesome tragedy). Cherry-pick later; first time through, read the whole big-hearted collection from beginning to end to savor how perfectly the romance of the last story informs the vision of the whole.”

—[Elizabeth Evans](#), author of [Carter Clay: A Novel](#)

“Bonnie ZoBell's linked novella and story collection, *What Happened Here*, made me feel as if I'd lived all my life in San Diego's North Park, whose inhabitants live and work in the long shadow of the 1978 airline crash that decimated the neighborhood. What is most extraordinary is the ease with which ZoBell at once accumulates the layers of a novelistic narrative *and* offers us beautifully written, compact stories with lives of their own. Like Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Red* or Haruki Murakami's *After the Quake*, ZoBell allows us a complete picture only through a nimble narrative triangulation between the many characters and stories. The hard-fought and bounded truth we see here is, I think, the truest kind of truth.”—[Jerry Gabriel](#), author of [Drowned Boy](#), winner of the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think there's a picture of a macaw on the cover of the book? What do the macaws mean in *What Happened Here*?
2. What purpose does the first story serve?
3. Do you see a similarity between what the characters want in this book?
4. How do you think the way you view life and the world would change if an airplane crashed into your neighborhood? What if it had crashed into your neighborhood thirty years ago but there were still signs of its havoc and neighbors who had lived there at the time?
5. Which character in *What Happened Here* do you identify with the most? The least?
6. Do you think the neighbors in this book interact with each other about the same amount as most neighbors do? Less? More?
7. What are the benefits of linking short stories as opposed to writing a novel?
8. What is the theme of this book?
9. How is humor used in this collection?
10. If you viewed the mini-documentary "North Park Eclectic" made by Melanie Peters and based on Bonnie's book, did the film inform your reading? (The mini-doc can be viewed on YouTube here:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFaR8\\_eHsnQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFaR8_eHsnQ) )

## About the Book

[\*What Happened Here\*](#) brings to life a wild cast of imaginary characters living on the same block in North Park, site of the PSA Flight 182 crash in 1978. The crash's legacy seeps into the lives of the neighbors, bringing grief, anxiety, and rebellion to the surface of each of these tales of contemporary life while humor darts through the book like the macaws that have taken to the trees in North Park. The birds ensure that there's never a dull moment in the neighborhood, and their outrageous colors and noisy squawks serve as constant reminders of regrowth.

## About the Author

**Bonnie ZoBell** lives right next to the crash site of PSA Flight 182, which inspired her to write her recently released linked collection from Press 53, *What Happened Here: a novella and stories*. Her fiction chapbook *The Whack-Job Girls* was published in March 2013. She received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in fiction, the Capricorn Novel Award, and a PEN Syndicated Fiction Award. She earned her MFA from Columbia University, currently teaches at San Diego Mesa College, and is working on a novel.

<http://www.press53.com/>  
<http://bonniezobell.com/>





## **An Interview with Bonnie ZoBell**

### **1. You're working on a novel now. Why move to the novel after the linked collection? What is your novel about?**

I'd already written a draft of my novel, *Animal Voices*, before I finished my recent linked collection, but then put it down for a while. I really like all forms of fiction.

*Animal Voices* starts out with a boy who lives in Del Mar Terrace before Interstate 805—the main thoroughfare between San Diego and Los Angeles—went through. He and a gang of his friends are called the Terrace Rats, and they're at war with some inland boys—they throw avocados at each other. All the boys play on the earthmovers and bulldozers the workmen leave behind when they go home at night. A very strange girl moves into the tin can house on the hill. She's able to communicate with animals. The kids think she's mighty weird, but as they get older, she and the boy end up marrying. Not long after, the man is diagnosed with AIDS. She's not very good at communicating with humans, but once they are both considered misfits in their own ways, she's able to get through to and help him.

### **2. Do you think you'll write more about North Park? What about San Diego? How important to your fiction is your hometown? How important is place in general?**

I'm sure I'll write about North Park again as I love this area and all its history. As I indicate above, my novel is set in another area of San Diego, near where I grew up, and takes an intimate look at that corner of our city. I love writing about San Diego because I know it so well, and I like reading books that are set in a variety of places because it's so interesting to try to understand what it would be like to live in different parts of the country and world. I've decided it's okay to set a lot of my work in San Diego because

Anne Tyler sets most of her novels in Baltimore, and John Waters sets all his films there, and I don't consider either of them at all regional.

Place is extremely important to me because I think it has such a big effect on characters and their values and the way they live their lives. My biggest goal is to make the place where my work is set one of the characters, too.

### **3. How does teaching creative writing help you as a writer?**

I have the most wonderful students in my fiction writing workshop ever semester. I teach it at night at a community college on purpose because I get such a variety of people—they're all different ages, colors, sexual persuasions, have different cultural backgrounds and so on. It's a perfect blend of diverse readers for my students. We have regular (and irregular!), young, matriculating students, veterans who have returned to school, working people with an array of interesting jobs, people with advanced degrees who want to better explore the creative parts of themselves, people putting portfolios together to apply for MFAs or BFAs, and so on.

They're so stimulating it does my writing good, too. Many of them are beginners, and going over basic technique again is valuable for me. Others have been writing a while, are more advanced and have taken other classes, and come up with exceptional ideas I haven't thought of before.

### **4. Do you have a favorite story in *What Happened Here*?**

I think my favorite story is always the last one I wrote because I'm still so emotionally caught up in it. In this case, it would be the title novella, "What Happened Here." This piece really brought the whole collection together for me as well as helped me determine the setting for all the stories. I was writing a story about how a man who was bipolar and having an emotional crash into serious depression. It was set near my real-life house where PSA Flight 182 crashed into North Park in 1978. I suddenly saw the parallel between the two crashes, and the story grew by leaps and bounds into a novella. From there, I was able to introduce in the novella most of the other neighbors in the collection at a commemoration party for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the plane crash. It really solved a lot of problems, and as usual, I got very emotionally invested in the characters in the novella.

### **5. What do you hope people will come away with, having read this collection?**

I hope people will feel they've had a good read and enjoy the stories. Hopefully, they'll see themselves in these tales about a very contemporary community in Southern California, a place filled with people of mixed income levels, races, and sexual persuasions, and about neighbors, relationships with family and friends, and the tragedies we all deal with, large and small. I hope they will want to read my novel!

## **6. Why did you make a mini-documentary about your neighborhood?**

There are so many people who were deeply affected and who are still deeply affected by the crash of PSA Flight 182 into my neighborhood that it seemed like a natural. If you go online and look up the crash, you will find dozens of sites with information about it, and then afterward there are often hundreds of people who've posted their own stories about how the crash touched them. Right around me in North Park, there are especially a lot of people who talk about it because it's the kind of neighborhood people don't move away from. Their families lived here, too.

My good friend [Melanie Peters](#), has helped me with some of the publicity for the book and happens to be an excellent filmmaker, so it came together that way. We didn't want the mini-doc to only be about the crash, just like the book isn't. We also wanted to show why people love North Park so, why it's such a dynamic character in and of itself. The mini-doc has been highly praised and we're proud of it.