

# Book highlights potholes of young adulthood

By DAVID JASPER  
*The Bulletin*

The road from youth to adulthood can be full of potholes and blind alleys, detours and obstacles. Proceeding with caution is advisable. Ed Garrison, the protagonist of “The Step Back,” a coming-of-age novel written by former central Oregonian J.T. Bushnell, must learn this the hard way after he loses the stability he’d known all through his childhood and his high school years. “The Step Back” is the first book by Bushnell, 40, who began writing it a decade ago. It was published this month by Portland State University’s Ooligan Press.

In the novel, as Ed cruises into summer, everything is going pretty swimmingly, playing as a basketball star with a full scholarship to University of California, Berkeley. But when his mother announces she’s gay and leaving his father for a woman across the country, Ed’s world, and immediate plans for the future, begin to come apart.

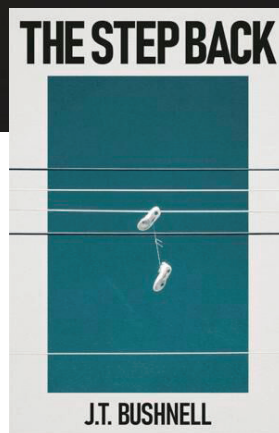
“This produces in him a kind of desperation, and in his desperation, he makes impulsive decisions, trying to latch onto something that will give him meaning and comfort,” Bushnell said.

“When we finish high school and depart for college, or whatever we depart for after high school, it’s like this big moment in our identity and our perception of ourselves, I think, because we’re moving away from the old associations that have sustained us, our friends and our family,” he said. “And we’re trying to forge this new life and identity. That’s always been a moment that’s really fascinated me as far as creation of identity to go along with the creation of community — whether that’s friends or family or larger communi-



Jennifer James-Long

ABOVE: J.T. Bushnell’s debut novel, ‘The Step Back,’ was published this week. RIGHT: The cover of Bushnell’s book, ‘The Step Back.’ He teaches writing and literature at Oregon State University.



ties, whatever.

“I think it’s a very difficult time that makes a lot of people feel very lonely, especially in our current culture. So my story is basically a way to enhance and dramatize what I think a lot of people feel, by basically exacerbating the isolation and the break from previous identities and communities that had sustained this character Ed.”

Growing up in Sisters with his three brothers — to whom he dedicates the book — Bushnell used to wait tables at Tumalo Feed Co., a restaurant started by his father.

His last two years of high school, he began writing sports recaps for The Sisters Nugget, leading him to major in journalism at Linfield College, albeit with enough elective literature

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J.T. Bushnell | author

and creative writing classes to also minor in English.

“For me, that was the fun stuff that I didn’t really consider part of my formal studies,” he said. “I always loved that stuff even though I didn’t major in it.”

The summer between his junior and senior years, he

interned at the Medford Mail Tribune, where he “basically just worked as a general assignment reporter for low pay,” he said. “They gave me these little throwaway stories that ended up running on the front page because they liked the way I handled them so much.”

That led to a job awaiting him upon graduation from Linfield, but he decided not to pursue journalism. Instead, he waited tables for a couple years for his father, and then in Portland for a couple of years.

“The purpose was to give myself a break from academic rigors, just because I was burnt out with that identity,” he said. But the work left his days for woodshedding as an aspiring fiction writer.

“I would just write furiously all day, short stories,

novels — garbage, but stuff that I really enjoyed doing,” he said, “just to kind of explore how interested I was and what I was capable of in terms of pursuing that interest. Would I get burned out halfway through a novel, and was it for me?”

About 20 short stories and two unpublished novels later, Bushnell decided the answer was yes. He began graduate work at University of Idaho.

Bushnell said he still isn’t sure why the school admitted him, “but I was really serious in my studies, and because I hadn’t studied creative writing like a lot of these people,

I was interested in absorbing all I could,” he said.

However, it was a doomed relationship. Upon being accepted at Idaho, he inquired about a teaching fellowship and learned that he should have applied for one back when he’d applied to school. He moved to Idaho anyway, but out-of-state tuition and no teaching opportunity meant still having to wait tables 35 hours a week and work on his writing and grad school on the side.

“It was an absolutely difficult time. I was constantly fighting off drowning just because of the workload,” Bushnell said. He threatened to apply to other schools if he couldn’t get a teaching fellowship. To give the threat some teeth, he applied to other schools, including University of Oregon, not necessarily expecting to get in.

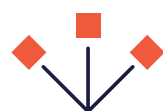
But University of Oregon offered the young writer a much better deal — full tuition waiver, teaching opportunities, even health insurance — only a couple of hours from his hometown.

Today, Bushnell teaches literature and writing courses at Oregon State University. He’s married and has two young daughters ages 3 and 6 months. Though he’d published many short stories in journals over the years, to now hold his debut, 10 years in the making, is different.

“There’s something about having a book that changes your status or self-perception as a writer,” Bushnell said. “Before this book was accepted for publication, I was always someone who’d just labored endlessly over my writing without that validation — not only for myself, but also, I think of my daughters growing up and thinking of me as this writer who just keeps working, working, working without success, and my daughters being able to grow up and hold my book in their hands and read it themselves.”

## How do we rebuild a better Oregon?

After a year of tremendous hardship, how do we rebuild a more interconnected, equitable, resilient Oregon? How do we help each other recover, rebuild, and restart our lives and businesses? How do we start listening to and considering each others’ point-of-view? How do we inject opportunity, across the state so everyone has a chance to add to the greater good? **The answer — Together.** Join us as we learn and share how to rebuild a better Oregon, for all Oregonians.



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