

**Full Interview Transcript**  
**Steven Wingate with Arsen Kashkashian of the Boulder Bookstore**  
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**AK:** Hi, I'm Arsen Kashkashian of the Boulder Bookstore and I'm talking with Steven Wingate, the author of the short story collection *Wifeshopping*, which will be coming out in July. Steven, I wanted to ask you a few questions. The title, *Wifeshopping*, could apply to many of the stories in the collection. It's a very varied collection, stylistically, and with many different characters, and yet you have the theme of men looking for relationships throughout the book. How did that come about?

**SW:** The collection came about between about 1992 and 1999, between the end of an unsuccessful marriage and the beginnings of a successful one, and I wrote a whole bunch of stories during that time. Probably two dozen stories that were all clustered around this idea of searching for love, because I think both psychically and imaginatively I was really trying to figure out what the love thing was and how relationships worked and why they didn't work. So out of that big bunch of stories, over the years and years, I just pulled out the best, and those are the thirteen in the collection.

**AK:** You've ended that stretch of time married, and yet your characters do not have a similar fate. What was the difference between you and your characters?

**SW:** I think if there's one thing I've learned from working with these characters and writing about these characters, and also from living, it's that it's very easy to confuse the search for your own identity with the search for love. And I think most of the characters in the book make that mistake to one degree or another. Some of them are closer to finding some kind of balance, and some of them don't really have much hope. So I think a lot of flexibility is obviously required in a long-term relationship; some of these characters know that and some of them just aren't able to get beyond their own search for self.

**AK:** You have several characters who are “out there,” away from their normal lives. They’re either on a trip, or they’re spending a summer in a town, and they fall into these romances that they struggle to make work—or not work. It seems like you have an interest in putting men in a position where they’re not in their normal lives. How does that play out in these characters?

**SW:** Well I think that’s just one of my writerly proclivities. I like to take characters and put them in situations where they reveal themselves, and that’s often where they’re not a familiar part of the scenery. When you don’t know where you’re going and you don’t know what you’re doing, you *have* to search for yourself in some way. You’re more likely to come face to face with yourself, to say “Oh my God, this is who I am, and now I have to deal with it.” I find that personally, this happens a lot in travel, and I think that my characters find it true as well. I like to take my characters and sort of put them in a paper bag, then see how they fight their way out of it—*if* they can fight their way out of it. And some of them don’t, some of them end up stuck in that inability to understand themselves; but some of them maybe tear a hole in that bag and have some hope of getting out.

**AK:** A lot of your characters seem to find bits and pieces of themselves in objects. They go to flea markets, they go to yard sales, they dig up objects in the backyard. Most of these objects they find, though, don’t lead to happiness in the relationships.

**SW:** We really invest a lot of meaning in objects, and sometimes two people—even people who are very close to each other--can invest extremely different types of meaning in objects. And when we invest meaning in objects we’re often bringing in our entire history, our family history, who we think we are, who use used to think we were. And sometimes in relationships, especially in this book, those things really happen at cross purposes, and they cause crux points in relationships because one person may feel one way about an object and another feels entirely differently. And it forces them to confront who they are and how they feel about each other.

**AK:** One of the stories in particular that I wanted to ask you about was “A Story About Two Prisoners,” [Note: Hear an audio at <http://www.stevenwingate.com/Media.html>] and

this story is much different in tone and character than a lot of the other stories. It's a shorter piece, and it just takes place in an apartment complex. And yet you convey a lot in there, through almost a list of words that each character comes up with. Can you talk a bit about what it's like to write a short piece like that?

**SW:** I definitely don't want to feel completely bound by the realist tradition. Most of these stories are very realist; but there's definitely a strain in me, in what I read and what I write, that doesn't really adhere to that. I hate to use the word "experimental," because it's such a charged word for so many people, but for me as a writer it's very important to walk into the lives of my characters without the chains of traditional narrative. And "Two Prisoners" was definitely a result of that process. I knew I had these these characters and not much of an arc—just barely enough to take it beyond the realm of the prose poem and into a story. I write a lot of things like that; sometimes they make it out to the world and sometimes they don't. But it really informs me as a writer to do those kind of projects, because I can play with language without any burden of plot or even characterization, and I learn from that. There's a wonderful quote from Zora Neale Hurston, which I hope I'm not butchering: "You pick up the pen when you are told and write what you are commanded." It's crucial to me to leave myself open to this kind of writing, because it's sort of my Mad Scientist Laboratory. Everything I put out to the world was either cooked up there first, or contains some element that was cooked up there.

**AK:** The stories contain a lot of heartache but they feel so vibrant and alive, and they're very entertaining to read. How do you deal with that dichotomy? Maybe you're dealing with a heavy issue like a breakup, and yet you have a very entertaining story.

**SW:** As a writer I have to entertain myself and keep myself happy, so working on a story over many, many drafts over many, many years, you have to get to know your characters, you have to get to know their warts as well as the things that are funny about them and quirky about them. So I always try to get to know the character in some kind of complete way. Everybody's got their own humor and their own likability, and so finding that in my characters allows me to write them better than if I were to simply focus on one aspect of them.

**AK:** Well so many of them are in transition moments in this narrative, in this short story collection, and you've captured them perfectly. You've created full characters in very short stories, and it does beg the question: will we see these characters again in other works?

**SW:** You won't see the characters, I don't think—I always could be wrong about that—but some of the themes that you talked about, especially with objects and the sanctity of objects, are definitely showing up in the novel I'm working on. I don't know if there will be a sequel, *Wifeshopping II*—I kind of think not—but I really do wish these characters luck wherever they go in their lives, and if one of them resurfaces, then I'll definitely work with him or her. They may have the same name and may not, but the same underlying soul may be there in other characters that I work with. You never can tell.