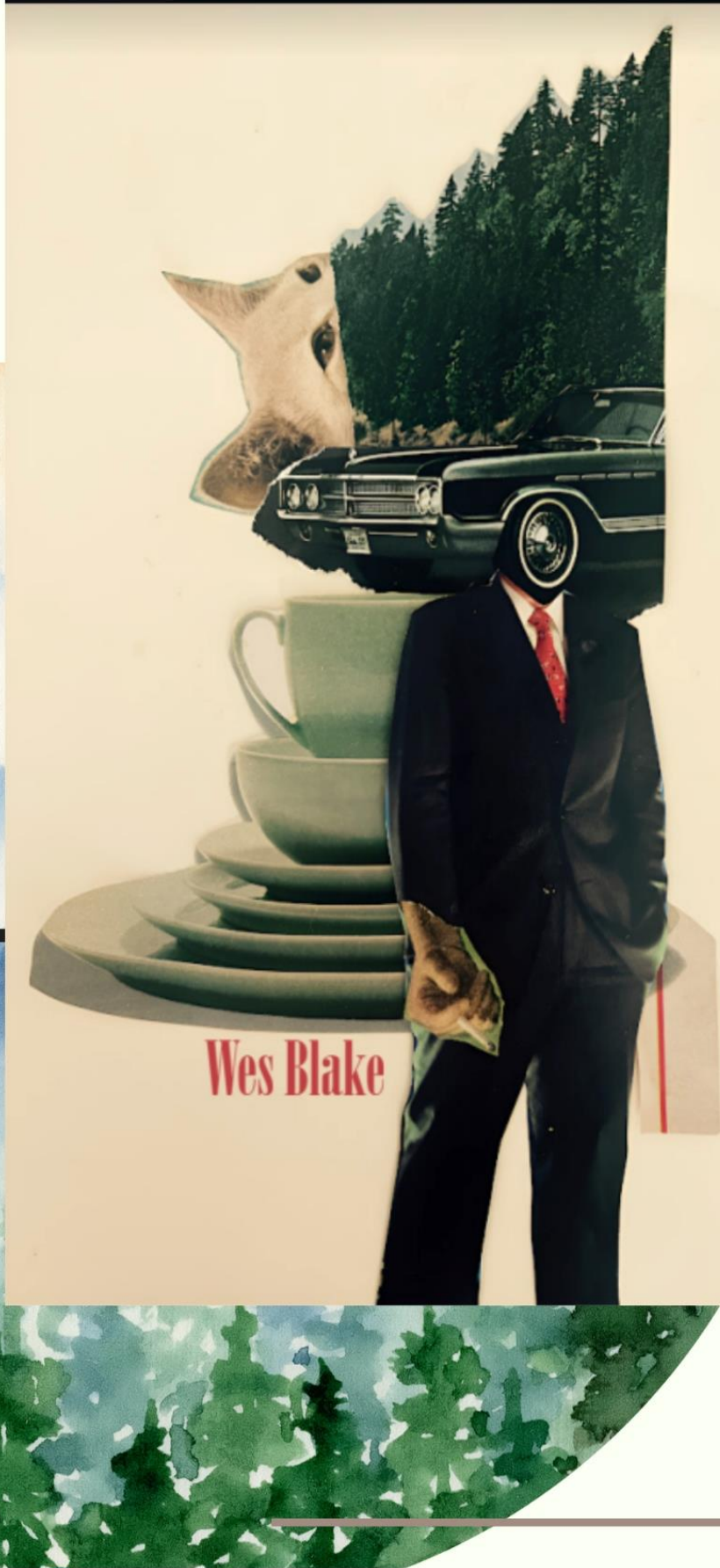


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# Introduction to *Pineville Trace* by Wes Blake

Winner of the University of Indianapolis' novella prize, *Pineville Trace* is a novella-in-flash that was published in 2024 by Etchings Press. The book centers on the experience of a character named Frank Russet. After being sentenced to a minimum-security prison in eastern Kentucky, former southern revival preacher and confidence man, Frank Russet, escapes. Taking only a cat named Buffalo and a desire to outrun his former life, he journeys to the fringes of society. As he struggles to survive, Frank confronts his past, seeking redemption amidst the wilderness. As Frank traverses the shadowy edges of society, he encounters remnants of his former self, forcing him to confront his deepest regrets and desires. Blake's haunting prose captures the essence of a man on the brink of transformation, urging readers to ponder the thin line between redemption and damnation.

## About Wes Blake

Wes Blake's novella-in-flash, *Pineville Trace*, won the Etchings Press Book Prize and was published in 2024 by the University of Indianapolis' Etchings Press. Lee Martin, author of Pulitzer Prize Finalist *The Bright Forever*, described him as "a writer to watch". His fiction and essays have appeared in Louisiana Literature Journal, Electric Literature, Blood & Bourbon, Book of Matches, Jelly Bucket, White Wall Review, and elsewhere. Wes' novel, *Antenna*, was a semifinalist for the UNO Press Lab Prize and the 2024 Sundress Publications prose contest. He holds an MFA from the Bluegrass Writers Studio and lives in Kentucky with his wife and cats, where they've planted over 116 trees.

## About Form

*Pineville Trace* is a novella-in-flash. Most of us are familiar with the novella—a form caught between a long short story and a novel, typically falling between 17,500 and 40,000 words. Flash fiction refers to a very short story—usually under 1,000 words—that still develops character, setting, and conveys a complete narrative arc. Flash fiction stories are closely related to narrative poems, can often be poetic, and have unique ranges of expression due to their concentrated form. So, a novella-in-flash is simply a novella length work that employs flash fiction stories as its chapters. You can read an essay the author wrote for JMWW journal, titled [“How to Write a Novella-in-Flash,”](#) to give you a sense of the form and what it can offer readers. Michael Loveday wrote an article about the unique qualities of a novella-in-flash in an essay for SmokeLong Quarterly, titled [“How to Spot a Novella-in-Flash at 100 Yards.”](#) Regarding flash fiction, the author wrote an article titled [“8 Brilliant Flash Fiction Books that Pack A Quick Punch”](#) that appeared in Electric Literature that gives a sense of what he values in the form. Here is an interview with the author discussing the power of novellas and flash fiction on [Kentucky Writers Roundtable](#). Lastly, the book was reviewed in SmokeLong Quarterly by A W Earl, and you can read [the review](#) to see how others viewed the book's form.

# Wes Blake's "library" While Writing the Book

To get a sense of books similar in spirit, you can read this essay by the author on Shepherd.com titled ["The best books that capture how it feels to be an outsider"](#) (like Frank Russet). Below are some of the books the author was reading and/or inspired by when writing *Pineville Trace*.

## Flash Fiction:

- *Delta 88* by Christopher Chambers
- *Whiskey, Etc.* by Sherri Flick

## Novellas:

- *Ray* by Barry Hannah
- *An Unfortunate Woman* by Richard Brautigan
- *We The Animals* by Justin Torres
- *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros
- *Dying Animal* by Phillip Roth
- *The Actual* by Saul Bellow
- *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras
- *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck
- *Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway
- *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean
- *Legends of the Fall* by Jim Harrison
- *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* by Stephen Crane
- *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad
- *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by Truman Capote
- *The Death of Ivan Ilych* by Leo Tolstoy
- *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Goethe
- *The Mysterious Stranger* by Mark Twain
- *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata
- *Train Dreams* by Denis Johnson

## Books that Impacted the Author Recently (regardless of form):

- *West of Sunset* by Stewart O'Nan
- *Masters of Atlantis* by Charles Portis
- *A Sport and a Past Time* by James Salter
- *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko
- *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Ogala Sioux* by John G. Neihardt
- *Crazy Horse: A Life* by Larry McMurtry
- *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

- *My Brother* by Jamaica Kincaid
- *Stoner* by John Williams
- *The Stars at Noon* by Denis Johnson
- *The Hotel New Hampshire* by John Irving
- *Immortality* by Milan Kundera
- *Book of Illusions* by Paul Auster

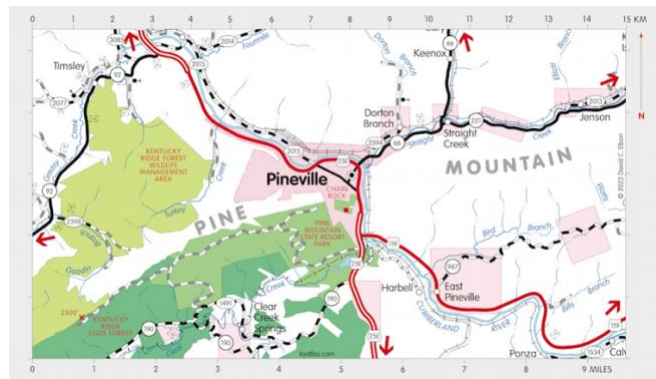
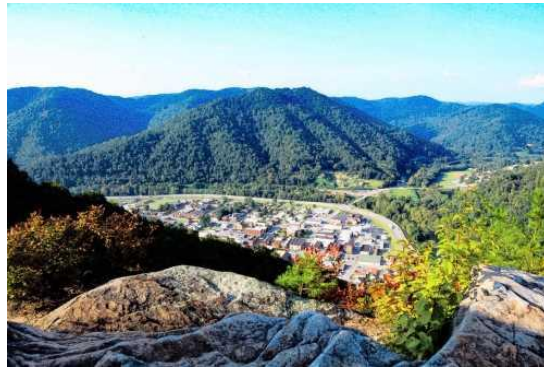
All-time Favorites that Always Inspire:

- *Fat City* by Leonard Gardner
- *Wiseblood* by Flannery O'Connor
- *Ironweed* by William Kennedy
- *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*
- *The Hunger Artist and Other Stories* by Franz Kafka
- *Angels* by Denis Johnson
- *Kinfolks* by Gurney Norman
- *Nothing Gold Can Stay* by Ron Rash
- *The End of the Affair* by Graham Greene
- *Steppenwolf* by Herman Hesse

# Inspirations for *Pineville Trace*

## Pineville, Kentucky

Pineville is right on the edge of Pine Mountain and the Cumberland Gap in southeastern Kentucky. The pictures below don't do it justice. This is where Frank begins his journey in *Pineville Trace*.

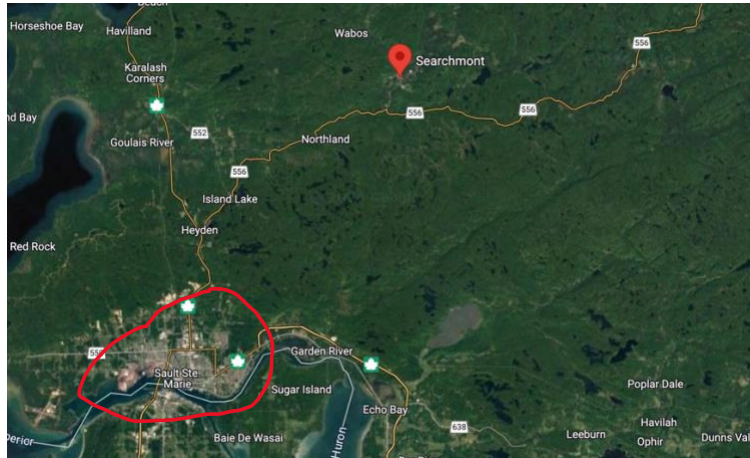
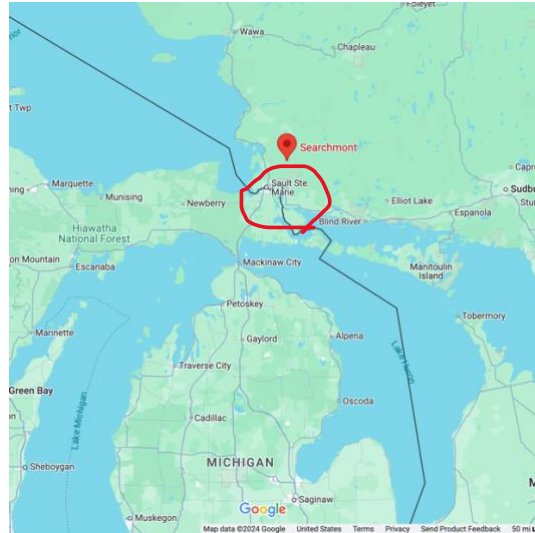






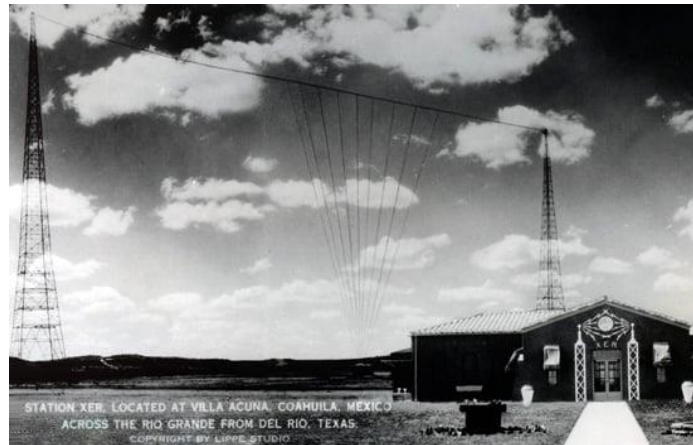
## The Canadian Wilderness & Border Towns: Searchmont and Sault Ste. Marie

You can get a sense of the remoteness of Searchmont, Canada by looking at the photographic mapping image (the second image), below. Also, you can see the route Frank took through Sault Ste. Marie—at the border between the United States and Canada.



## Border Blasters

The antenna that Frank visits in Ciudad Juarez was inspired by the XERF radio border blaster antenna images below. During the early and middle-twentieth century, these border antennas and radio stations became profitable by skirting FCC regulations. These radio stations on the Texas-Mexico border were a mecca for conmen. By the time Frank returns to the antenna that figured so prominently in his life, it would have been a pale imitation of what it had been in its prime.





## Revival

These are images from revivals in the south during the middle-twentieth century, much like the ones Frank Russet would have been a part of. These images inspired some of the scenes in that part of his life. These are the kinds of views Frank would have had during his career as a revival preacher and faith healer. Notice the sunlight coming in at the edges of the revival tent in the first picture and imagine how the atmosphere would change after dusk. Notice the tree line in the distance of the second image.



# A Conversation with Wes Blake

**Q:** When did the idea for *Pineville Trace* begin? What was your writing process when creating your novella-in-flash?

**A:** I had written about the character, Frank, before, and thought that I had already told his story. But, on a warm February day in 2022, I was driving on a winding road on Pine Mountain near the Bell County Forestry Camp prison, and I realized that Frank was not through with me. The idea for *Pineville Trace* came to me while I was driving, and I used my phone's voice recorder to get the idea down before it was lost to me. The strangest part was that right after I recorded my first ideas for the novella, a car like Frank's black 1959 Buick LeSabre drove past me on that isolated road on Pine Mountain. What are the odds? It was eerie. But it was clear that Frank wanted his story to be told. Writing *Pineville Trace* was exciting. A lot of the writing process was an act of discovery and was charged like the original idea for the book. I loved being able to write about Frank again. I had missed him. Several years had passed since I wrote about him, and it was like spending time with an old friend that you didn't think you'd ever see again.

I wrote every day while I worked on the book. I sat at my writing desk and wrote in the early weekday mornings before dawn and would write longer on weekends. It was a fun challenge to try and make every chapter a flash story with its own energy that would stand alone, but also develop and deepen Frank's story. Writing the chapters as flash stories offered opportunities to create meaning through structure—placing one flash chapter before, after, or near another, enhanced meaning. Similarly, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Ron Rash's *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, and Gurney Norman's *Kinfolks* also create meaning through structure while developing an overarching character as their individual pieces add up to something larger.

After letting the first draft sit for a few months, I picked it up again and read it with fresh eyes. I went over the novella four or five more times, polishing until it was as good as I could make it. I wanted to make sure I got Frank's story right. After working on the book for a year and a half, I was sad to say goodbye to Frank.

**Q:** What was the inspiration to have Frank be a former revival preacher? Do you have personal ties with it or was it a career that felt right for his character?

**A:** In the summer of 2014, I was at the Disquiet writing conference in Lisbon, and someone said, "write about what obsesses you." That phrase stuck with me. It felt important. I walked along the cobblestone streets in Barrio Alto—a hilly neighborhood above the Tagus River—at dusk thinking about that. *Write about what obsesses you.* As I walked along, and the sky got dark, I thought about what did obsess me. And that's when the inspiration for Frank came to me—the inspiration for him as a revival preacher. I remembered when I was in high school in the nineties, my good friend, Mark, and his family were always telling stories about his great uncle—a famous revival preacher who had lived in Kentucky and Mississippi. And their stories about him were so charged. They were fascinating. I loved hearing them. And I would always ask about him. Even after I'd heard all the stories, I'd ask to hear more, hoping they had forgotten one or would tell one in a different way, adding some detail they'd forgotten. He was short and small, but people told stories about how they saw him lift a car by its back bumper. He was described as genuine, down to earth. A careful and interested listener

that remembered what you told him and wanted to hear it, no matter who you were. Yet he made a small fortune doing traveling revival and radio shows. He was supposedly an influence on Elvis Presley. The way people spoke about him was unlike I've heard people talk about anyone else. People loved him. They loved to talk about him. You could tell by the stories they told that this person made their lives more lively. That he gave them something that stayed with them. He made their lives bigger. Some people swore they saw him perform miracles. And there were also stories about him disappearing alone for weeks at a time into the wilderness of the Barrier Islands in the Gulf of Mexico. There were fraud accusations. It was hard to reconcile who this person really was. And my idea for Frank was born then, remembering all these stories and how obsessed I had been to know who someone like that really was.

I wanted to write about a revival preacher like Frank because someone like that is a mystery. They're impossible to know. I wanted to discover who Frank was. When was Frank genuine and when was he putting on a show? Was it always one or the other? Did he find his way and lose it? And, if so, could he find it again? I wanted to find out. Revival preachers—especially in the south—are such a uniquely American breed. I can't imagine them anywhere else. They offer and contain maximum possibility, salvation, ambition, magic, charisma, passion, excitement, and deception. They were the first rock 'n' roll stars, going from town to town and making people feel something they couldn't feel in their everyday lives. Revival preachers were all heart. They got your attention and made you feel. I wanted to explore who someone like that really was. What was their interior life like? What parts of them were genuine? How did they change over time? What did success or failure do to them? What were they like offstage? I wanted to understand.

**Q:** Etchings readers had a common interest in Frank's cat Buffalo. Are you a cat fan? Did you always know that Frank would have a cat companion?

**A:** Yes, I love cats! My wife and I have two cats—a calico named Pig and a tortoiseshell named Queak, and we had three for a long time. I always wanted a cat when I was a kid. My parents convinced me to quit sucking my thumb by bribing me with a pet cat because they knew I wanted one more than anything. But we couldn't get one because we found out my brother was allergic. So, I hung out with my grandmother Nanny's cat every chance I got. Like cats are wont to do, Buffalo worked herself into the story. In an earlier story about Frank, Buffalo made a brief appearance. But, like Frank, she wanted to be a major character and have her story told. When I first got the idea for *Pineville Trace*, I did envision Buffalo being a larger part of Frank's story. But I didn't know to what extent and how she would be involved. At this point in Frank's life, he is tired of people and himself, so a cat has the best statistical chance of becoming his companion.

**Q:** What is a fun fact that you have about this novella or about your writing process for this novella?

**A:** I love novellas. I always have. I will defend them all day. The form is so powerful and concise. Novellas like Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, Marguerite Duras' *The Lover*, Denis Johnson's *Train Dreams*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and Richard Brautigan's *Unfortunate Woman* haunted me. Novellas combine the brevity and potent effect of a short story or flash fiction with the character development of a novel.

*Delta 88*, a stellar book by Christopher Chambers, was an influence on the form of *Pineville Trace*. It's a collection of flash stories, but they have a consistent point of view and character, so when you read it, you get these brilliant, contained, and compelling flashes of prose—and they evolve throughout

the book like a novel. And it's so beautifully written and true to life that it inspired me to try to achieve something similar in my own way, with my own angle.

I wanted to write the kind of book that I loved—and honor the novella form while trying to expand it. The way form and content intersected made writing this book exciting. I wanted to capture small flashes of honesty like the best flash stories do and build a story that gives readers an impactful experience like my favorite novellas.

You can read the author's [interview in X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine](#) to learn more about *Pineville Trace*'s emphasis on place, nature, religion, spirit, trees, animals, symbols, myth, memory, and its inspiration:

**X-R-A-Y**

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**How does a place make you feel? And what aspects of the place make you feel that way and why? We can't separate ourselves from our environments, and they affect our outer and inner worlds. Our inner landscapes color how we perceive our outer world. I strive to capture this reality in *Pineville Trace*.**

**-from an interview with Wes Blake about his book 'Pineville Trace'**



# AN INTERVIEW WITH WES BLAKE ABOUT HIS BOOK 'PINEVILLE TRACE' by Rebecca Gransden



# Discussion Questions

1. Frank Russet is a con man who begins the story by walking away from a minimum-security prison. How did you relate to him as a character? Did you feel empathy for him? Why or why not? How do you feel about him?
2. *Pineville Trace* is a novella-in-flash. What was your experience reading this form, and how was it different than a traditional novel?
3. What was your favorite chapter or scene and why?
4. Setting is an important part of the story. How did the setting impact the story and the emotional landscape of the characters? What was the relationship between character and setting? Which setting stood out to you as the most memorable or meaningful? How were time, setting, and character interrelated?
5. What are your thoughts about Buffalo, Frank's companion? Why is she so important to Frank? What function does she serve for Frank Russet, and how would you describe their friendship? How does she help Frank? How is her name meaningful?
6. What is Frank Russet seeking in this story? Peace? Escape? Rest? Redemption? Sanctuary? Healing? A new start? Something else? Does he find what he's looking for? How might his story be relevant to our modern lives?
7. How does Frank Russet change throughout the story and why?
8. Why do you think Frank Russet walks away from the minimum-security prison? Was it an intuitive choice?
9. Frank Russet spends much of the novella reflecting on his past. Why is this? Is this how many people experience the present moment or is it unique to him?
10. Is there something about Frank's character and experience that is singularly American? If so, what? And what might be the implications of this?
11. What is your favorite passage or quotation from the novella and why?
12. *Pineville Trace* has three parts. How is Frank different in each part and why?
13. Frank's Buick LeSabre and gray suit are central to his identity, and he clings to them. Why? Why are they meaningful to him? What might they represent and what purpose do they serve?
14. When he was 82, during the final days of his life, the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy left his home in the middle of the night, and left a letter to his wife that said, "Do not seek me. I feel that I must retire from the trouble of life. I want to recover from the trouble of the world. It is necessary for my soul and my body." Do these words resonate with Frank Russet? Why or why not?
15. What ideas and/or contradictions do you feel are central to *Pineville Trace* and why? What commentary do you feel Frank's story provides about these ideas?
16. Did *Pineville Trace* remind you of your own experience or observations in any way, and if so, how? What struck you as you read the book? What stood out to you? What did the book make you feel or think about that you'd like to discuss?
17. Here is a playlist at [Largehearted Boy](#) that the author created for *Pineville Trace*. If you were to create a playlist for a movie version of the book, which songs would you choose for which scenes and why?
18. What question/s would you want to ask the author?