



How far would you go
to hunt down your muse?

How long can you burn
and still be alive?

5TH
AND
VANGUARD

LEE ADAMS

Painting by local artist Joanie Karnowski

► [Culture Agent](#) | 10.21.08 | sander@lbpost.com

Standing Behind Her Art: Local Novelist Lee Adams

Lee Adams' new book, *5th and Vanguard*, is having a coming out party this Saturday, October 25th, from 7-8 PM at Portfolio Coffeehouse, located on the South East corner of 4th Street and Junipero. Copies of the book will be on sale for \$14, and Lee will be reading a bit, and signing copies.

I have to say, though, that this is a huge thrill for me. I've known Lee for nearly 20 years. I'm a huge fan of her music, and was fortunate enough to read an early version of the book when it was in a formative stage.

I often struggle with sharing my own personal opinions about things because, quite frankly, I consider them to be largely inconsequential. In this case, however, I can share a few insights that, hopefully, will motivate you to attend the release party and buy a copy.

First, the book is an easy read. I blasted through 80% of the book in a few days. It's also a page turner. Once you start, be prepared to ride the train to the station. It's also grueling. Her characters are painfully real. The struggles they face become your struggles, and you may scream, as I did, and curse Lee's name for putting the heroine, Julie, into such a terrible and compelling circumstance. Still, you'll pick up the book and turn the page and discover that, along with Julie, you've found a bit of transformation as well.

You'll also discover that you're hooked, that you've developed a 'word jones,' and that nothing but Lee's next novel will satisfy that needful hunger. Lee took the time to answer a few questions about 5th and Vanguard:

Sander: Tell me a bit about the premise of 5th and Vanguard.

Lee: It's noir fiction, a murder mystery, but it's also an examination of the creative process, and that is perhaps more the point than the whodunit aspect of the story. The question the reader is asked is "How far would you go to hunt down your muse?" and that's really what the book is about.

Sander: How did you come to work in the 'noir' genre?

Lee: Well, I don't remember making that choice, it's just how I think. It's very "noir" in my head.

Sander: Tell me about Julie, the story's heroine.

Lee: Julie Page, yeah, Well, she's a writer, but when we meet her she hasn't written anything for a long time. And she's a former junkie. When we're introduced, Julie's sober, holding down a "real" job, in a steady relationship, etc. But she can feel her past pulling at her for the first time in a long time. Seems the closer she gets to being inspired enough to write again, the closer she steps toward the ledge, metaphorically. Nonetheless, she's compelled to, which is what happens one particularly cold night in front of a liquor store called Bob's Liquor Palace around 3:00 A.M. Coincidentally, that liquor store is located at the corner of 5th and Vanguard.

Sander: Part of her charm, though, is that she's not this perfect, idealized creation. She's complex, and subtle, with a past and, hopefully, a future.

Lee: She's a mess, absolutely. Personally, I've never really trusted anyone who isn't. I don't really relate that well to characters that always end up doing the right thing or winning in some way. Life isn't like that. And as for Julie having a future, I certainly hope she has a future; I'm writing a series.

Sander: Another major character in the story is Berle, the town where Julie lives, and where the story unfolds. Tell me a bit about Berle.

Lee: Berle is a seaport city that was built on oil. In fact, there are oil derricks in front of the house Julie lives in. Old machine shops and diners and bars on one corner and mansions practically next door. Berle is very Long Beach in many ways, but I write fiction so the town becomes more like an iconic ghost of some Long Beach we keep trying to remember. I hope I've painted a place that's as mythic as Gotham and as familiar as your own home town. And it is a central character, you're dead right. If the reader likes Berle, they'll probably like the books; if they don't, they'll probably be happier reading something else.

Sander: Tell me a bit about the process of writing the book. When did you complete the first draft, and how does it compare to the final version?

Lee: I started this one nine years ago. What I've published bears some semblance of the first draft, but is very different. I'd like to think I've become a much better writer over those years, and that each rejection letter propelled me to look for better ways to tell the story I wanted to tell. Of course, rejection letters never really let you in on why you're being rejected. You're left to guess. Then you find yourself rewriting based on a hunch. This can make the writing sharper, make you catch things that are sloppy and flesh things out better, or it can have you robbing your

own characters and altering your themes and perspective in some vain attempt to please a faceless publisher or agent. That's no good. Over those nine years, I probably sent the book out three or four times, small mailings. And over those years, the rejections got a lot nicer, kind of chatty. They went from form letters to "Dear Lee, this is really good, but..." That's when it became clear to me that the whole hunt and peck for a house or agent to sign me was fundamentally wrong. It may be a financially better way to go, but it doesn't have a damn thing to do with art. At the end of the day, you've got to stand behind your art and let it be what it is, not some washed out version you've bleached for someone else. Maybe what you create moves people, maybe it doesn't. But you've got to stand behind it. Otherwise, you're in the wrong business, right?

Sander: Right! How does it feel to hold the printed book in your hand?

Lee: It's been a slow train coming, and though the characters and story have long been real in my head, I had become less and less convinced that they would ever be made manifest. Nine years is a long time. So, seeing the book is huge. And not only can I hold the book, but it looks really fantastic, John Feijoo working on the graphics and Joanie Karnowski painting the cover art. People can absolutely judge this book by its cover.

Sander: What else should the public be forewarned about in advance of reading 5th and Vanguard?

Lee: Someone said to me the other day that I should write "Follow your muse" inside each book I sign and I thought wow, no, that's not what I'm trying to say here. I'm trying to say that if you follow your muse, be prepared for some scars. And if you aren't pretty tough, don't follow her at all because she can kill you, literally. Julie says your muse has to be hunted down like the alluring, destructive criminal that she is. I agree with her.

For those who can't attend Saturday's book release party, the book is now on sale at [Portfolio Coffeehouse](#), and on-line at [Amazon.com](#). Visit [5thandVanguard.com](#) to learn more, share your thoughts about the book, and read reviews, love letters, and more. You can also visit [Lee's MySpace Page](#) to hear music from her wonderful CD, [Champions and Lunatics](#).