Beyond the compass: even before his beloved novel Spartina won the National Book Award in 1989, John Casey had written its sequel. So why was Compass Rose just published—and was it worth the wait?

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THE front door of John Casey's home in Charlottesville, Virginia, slowly swings open. The author is cloaked in the shadow of the dark interior, which stands in deep contrast to the brilliant sunshine outside. Two dogs bark loudly. Casey emerges--bright eyed, smiling--with a pipe clenched in his mouth. Sinewy and athletic, he looks younger than his seventy-one years; the only feature that hints at his age is the white hair that sits atop his head and adorns his jaw.

"Oh, hello ... yes, come in," he says, as though he had forgotten we had made an appointment to talk. A friend of mine, the artist Lincoln Perry, who is the husband of author Ann Beattie, makes introductions and excuses himself to continue working on the massive mural he is painting at the University of Virginia campus, where both Casey and Beattie teach in the school's MFA program.

After moving a small stack of books from a chair, Casey invites me to sit at the cluttered dining room table he is currently using as a desk. I had contacted Casey somewhat impulsively last year, when it occurred to me that it was the twentieth anniversary of his National Book Award-winning novel, Spartina, published by Knopf in 1989. I am almost evangelical in my love of the book, and I've gifted it to more than three dozen people since first discovering it more than ten years ago. The first paperback edition of Spartina I read mentioned that the novel was part of a planned trilogy set on the Rhode Island coast along Narragansett Bay and Block Island Sound. I've reread the novel a handful of times over the years and often wondered what had become of the book's sequel.

When I first reached out to Casey, I learned that he had just completed his sixth rewrite of Compass Rose (which Knopf published in October). Two hours after sending my initial e-mail, Casey replied by sending me the opening chapters. Several exchanges and many months later, I am sitting in Casey's dining room. As he repacks his pipe, I steal glances around the room. A cache of pipes sits atop a nearby bookshelf. Scraps of paper covered in Casey's tiny, nearly indecipherable handwriting--notes to himself, lists of hiking supplies, and bits of poetry he's been reading--surround his laptop. A stack of color prints shows the evolution of the dust jacket for Compass Rose.

It has been a long road to Casey's dining room, but not nearly as long as the author's own journey to the completion of his new novel.

JOHN Dudley Casey was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1939. At the time, his father, Joseph Edward Casey, was midway through his term as a Democratic congressperson in Massachusetts, occupying the same seat that John F. Kennedy would one day hold.

Like his father, Casey studied law. In 1965 he graduated from Harvard Law School. But while at Harvard, Casey, who was already an avid drama enthusiast, took a writing workshop with Peter...
Barbara Hamilton has written this letter to offer compensation for a difficult rail journey. In the nineteenth century, John Ruskin, an English writer and art critic, made great efforts to encourage people to draw, believing that this was a much-neglected skill. As well as giving lectures, he published two books on drawing, which were widely read. Ruskin’s efforts were not aimed at turning people into good artists but at making them happier. He felt that, when we are involved in the process of drawing something, we become more aware of the different parts which make up the whole. It is in this way that we come to a deeper appreciation and understanding of the thing it. The moon had not yet risen. Presently, within two hours or less, it would top the eastern ridge of the further mountains and give light to the whole sky. They were waiting, the people from the valley. There must have been three hundred or more, waiting there in groups beside the huts. The boy had a pick and a knife thrust in his belt. The man watched me with his sullen, stupid face. “Your friend is dead,” he said. Even the air in the small bedroom had turned chill; a draught came under the skirting of the door, blowing upon the bed. Nat drew the blanket round him, leant closer to the back of his sleeping wife, and stayed watchful, aware of misgiving without cause. Then he heard the tapping on the window.