

# Interview with Bret Anthony Johnston

**FRONT PORCH: In your story collection *Corpus Christi: Stories*, you use setting as more than just a backdrop for the action of the story. Many times you use the setting to heighten tension either directly or indirectly. What is your philosophy of setting in story? How important is it?**

BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON: For me, both as a reader and a writer, setting is almost synonymous with character. The physical landscape dovetails into the social landscape. I'm interested in how characters—that is, how *people*—see and experience their surroundings depending on what's happening in their lives. I'm not a writer who can dream up a character or story idea and then plop it into any old place. Place is story. Place is conflict. Place is character. Or it should be, to my way of thinking.

As for South Texas, I'm fascinated by its complexity, by its splendor and magnificence, by its brutality and emptiness. Every time I come back to Texas, I'm struck by its expansiveness, its sheer openness, and how it makes me feel so vulnerable. Maybe it's some kind of evolutionary residue, how animals feel so exposed and endangered where there's no place to take cover. I'm interested in putting characters in that situation, physically and emotionally, so I'm interested in the characters that the Texas landscape spawns. I'm quite sure all of my work won't be set in Texas, but right now, the place and its people are wholly and inherently captivating to me.

**FP: You grew up in Corpus Christi and all the stories in your collection are set there. Did you always intend the collection to take place in your hometown or did it just evolve during the process of writing these stories?**

BAJ: That Corpus could sustain a collection of stories, that it was a locale interesting and unique enough to become something of a main character in the book, didn't occur to me until I'd written about half of the stories. I never intended to write a book set in Texas, let alone in Corpus, but as the stories started to cohere and echo off one another, it occurred to me that the place might be a sun around which the stories could orbit. Had I intended to write a book of linked stories, I sincerely doubt that it would have succeeded in whatever way it currently succeeds. I have zero interest or faith in a writer's intentions, not least my own. If you succeed in writing what you intended to write, it usually sucks. There has to be an element of surprise and ineffability in the writing, an element of discovery. If the writer's not surprised, the reader won't be either. You have to write the book you'd want to read.

**FP: Most collections are named after one of the short stories in the collection, but yours is named after the shared setting of all the stories. Did you come up with the title and did you have to fight for it?**

BAJ: I wanted to name the book *Corpus* because anyone who's familiar with the city refers to it that way, "body" alone. And I liked how the idea of the body, the physical self, braided itself through the stories. But my editor thought that calling it *Corpus* would get it lumped in with mysteries and thrillers at bookstores, so he mounted a campaign to convince me that it should be called *Corpus Christi*. Since mysteries and thrillers sell far better than literary story collections, I was all for perpetuating the confusion, riding it to the bank, but he wasn't having it.

**FP: How did the people of Corpus Christi react to being written about?**

BAJ: I couldn't have asked for a more generous reception to the book. The city founded a citywide reading program called Corpus Christi Reads because of the book and named the collection the program's inaugural selection. For a whole year, any and every member of the community was invited to read the book and take part in various events. They brought me down for readings at libraries, bookstores, and schools. I read a story on a stage at a famous local club, the very same club where years before I'd seen the band Dread Zeppelin play. So, the reception was lovely. I kept waiting for someone to take me aside and rail on me for having cannibalized some aspect of his or her life, something I'd unconsciously internalized, but no one ever did. If anything, people gave me grief because I *hadn't* used them as characters.

**FP: You've commented that you re-read *The Great Gatsby* every year. What keeps pulling you back? What do you get from this novel that you don't get from other books?**

BAJ: To my mind, the book is almost perfect. There's not a word out of place. I could go on and on about it, but one of the things that keeps me coming back is that moment when Gatsby tells Nick that Daisy's voice is "full of money." It's beautiful and heartbreaking and unlike anything else I've read. And the narration, how the book would collapse if anyone but Nick narrated it. And the prose, that last line: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Lordy, Lordy. I read it, again and again, because the book always makes me want to write. When I was working at Half Price Books in Corpus, I spent a month's pay on a first edition of the book.

**FP: As a reader, one of the things I loved about your book is how well it portrayed the quiet desperation and sacrifice of blue-collar life. Was this something you were conscious of while writing these stories, or did it evolve from your own background? Is there something about the working-class life that lends itself to be fictionalized?**

BAJ: Thank you for those nice words. Really. I resist the idea—not that you've suggested it, but others have—that one socio-economic plane is more rife with conflict or hardship than others. Look at *Gatsby*, a book that explores opulence and decadence and how they shred people's lives. For me, as a writer, it goes back to place, how the setting forms and informs character. It would be all but impossible to write about Corpus in any meaningful way without focusing on blue-collar life. There are certainly pockets of wealth in the city, just as there are more affluent characters in the book, but I suppose I was more interested in the characters who are struggling to make ends meet. The job of fiction writers is to put pressure on their characters. I'm fundamentally and endlessly interested in how people, real or imagined, handle trouble. Will this character handle this situation with grace or without it? Will this character resort to violence, or will he flee? Economics is one of many ways to exert pressure on characters, pressure that must finally and essentially reveal who the character is.

**FP: Most writers I know were sensitive, self-professed geeks when they were younger, but you were a professional skateboarder. Skateboarders are perceived as hip, young urbanites who only care about the next ramp or empty pool. Growing up, was there any tension between the sensitive writer side of you and the pro skater side of you?**

BAJ: Actually, I'm not sure those two "sides" are mutually exclusive. I know—and continue to hear about—skaters who've gone on to have great success, despite society's low expectations. I know of skaters who've become neurosurgeons, rare book dealers, mathematicians, musicians, renown photographers, actors, visual artists, writers, editors, librarians, university administrators, ministers and so on. I really do believe that skaters perceive their surroundings—that is, the world—through different lenses than everyone else. Skaters look for handrails preceded by clear, smooth pavement; they look for empty pools with intact coping and decent transitions. Their vision is conditioned to seek out the details that everyone else overlooks. They focus—and to some degree, obsess—on minutia that, through their focus and obsession, becomes significant. (Now, who sounds like a geek?) What do we expect from artists of any stripe except that they transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, or that they make the extraordinary familiar? That our society relegates artists and writers to the fringes, that our society deems them misfits whose silly books and paintings will be tolerated but not celebrated, is not unrelated to how the country and culture denigrates skaters.

**FP: In your non-fiction essay “Trick Tip” you completely demystify the skater ethos by juxtaposing it against these heartbreaking moments about your father and mother. It seems like the kind of story that a writer has to get some distance on before writing? Was it an emotionally difficult story to tell?**

BAJ: Only—and this will sound strange, but it’s absolutely true—because it was about skateboarding. I’d pretty much vowed to never write about skateboarding. This wasn’t for any nostalgic or sentimental reasons, but because I knew the subject so, so well. I’m not a writer who’s very interested in the “write what you know” mantra; I’m interested in writing what I *don’t* know, what I *want* to know. So, because writing about skateboarding promised no surprises for me, because I saw no hope for discovery, I’d avoided it entirely.

**FP: Which are better—literary fans or skater fans?**

BAJ: I wouldn’t know. I have no fans. It’s sad, actually. Thanks for bringing it up.

**FP: Your non-fiction work plays around with form more than your short stories. Is there something inherent in non-fiction that allows this more than fiction?**

BAJ: This is a good question, one that I’ve never considered before. I think it has to do with that sense of discovery we were just talking about. With my nonfiction, which I mostly write after an editor has been kind enough to get in touch with me, I still crave that sense of writing into the unknown, but if I know the subject matter fairly well, the discovery often comes in with how it’s written. Before “Trick Tip,” I’d never written anything in the second-person, so I set that goal for myself.

**FP: I’ve heard some writers who claim they’ve never started a short story that wasn’t published within a month or two, and I’ve heard other writers claim they have stories and novels stuffed in drawers from decades ago they know they will one day finish. Which kind of writer are you? Is there a story or half-finished work that you return to again and again, but just aren’t ready for?**

BAJ: I’m always working on something that no one will see for months or years, but I rarely abandon projects. I can think of two stories that I’ve given up on, and a year ago I returned to one of them, retooled it, and now I think it’s one of the best things I’ve ever written. It had been dormant for ten years, an honest-to-God decade. Maybe I’ll eventually resurrect the other one.

Because I am such a slow writer, I have to pick and choose my projects pretty deliberately. I discard most of my ideas before I ever make it to the keyboard or legal pad. I don’t trust—not one iota—those rushes of inspiration, those ideas that demand to be scribbled down in the middle of the night. Writing isn’t romantic to me. If an idea is viable, it will last and linger; it will be there when I need it. One of the ways a writer matures, I think, is by getting ever so slightly more proficient at identifying what might make viable writing. Not that it’s an entirely rational process, this mode of selection. You just learn where and how to devote your time. You learn how to nurture your imagination, learn how to commit yourself more deeply to the craft, the writing process. The craft is the muse. Writing begets writing. Your only obligation is to show up for work, to clock in, to log hours.

**FP: It has been argued that creative writing workshops homogenize fiction and create what is known as the “workshop story.” As a graduate of the Iowa Writer’s Workshop and a current creative writing professor, what do you think of this claim? From your own experience is this true?**

BAJ: Not only is it patently untrue, it’s insulting. I’ve been in workshops, either as a student or teacher, for going on twelve years and I’ve never—*never*—read two stories that even remotely resemble each other. Have you? No one that I know ever has. Occasionally you’ll have a writer who’s emulating or parroting Carver or Denis Johnson or Lorrie Moore or Dave Eggers, but that’s how artists hone their craft. The practice is not dissimilar from how apprentice painters do master studies. And I would argue that the writers who cut their teeth by imitating Carver and Moore would be doing that whether they’re in a workshop or not, and that they *are* in a workshop, a community of sophisticated readers, might in fact expedite their progress toward finding their own voices. The onus of what to write is on the student, not the MFA program. No writing teacher assigns students subjects for their stories, so this myth of institutionalized homogenization of stories is flawed at both ends of the argument. Writing is nothing less than the profound act of witness and that more and more writers are practicing their craft, and practicing it well, is entirely good news. So, no, I see no trace evidence of the infamous workshop story. And even if I did, what’s wrong with having a culture of people who can write a coherent, satisfying story? Wouldn’t that be a good thing in our country? Wouldn’t that make each day just a little better?

—interview conducted by John Dean via e-mail on November 25, 2007