PRISM REVIEW CONTEMPORARY INTERVIEW

BRYAN HURT

Bryan Hurt, the author of the Alissa Nutting-selected-Starcherone Prize-winning collection of stories *Everyone Wants to be Ambassador to France . . .*

. . . is a doctor.

Hence: Bryan Hurt is Dr. Hurt.

This cracks me up.

I'm not sure Bryan Hurt thinks it's funny. Which means it probably isn't. Because Bryan Hurt is funny. Really funny. In a dry-as-a-dinosaur's-hip-bone-soaked-in-rubbing-alcohol-then-set-on-fire-because-why-not-do-that-and-hey-let's-leave-the-bone-in-Death-Valley-for-a-thousand-years way of funny (ie "really dry" & "bizarro"). In Bryan's fiction, characters nearly meet their doom . . . atop rotting whale corpses. Men shoot at potential brides . . . to instill fortitude. People actually drive Deloreans. Cars actually drive people. The moon! And heaven! And other moons, other heavens! Miranda July and tuna fish? Why not?

Bryan Hurt is funny . . . and this is impressive, because funny is a hard thing. There's an awfulness to humor that we often forget about. I for one am not entirely convinced that anything can actually be funny without the humor coming at someone's expense. (Well, maybe puns . . . but otherwise?) Think about it. Think of the things you laugh at. The jokes. The situations. The moments. TV shows, books, movies. Laughter is almost always *at* someone. Humor is an act of cruelty, and it's made all the crueler for those smiles, that laughter. The thing is, Bryan Hurt knows this – and he embraces it. His fictions are funny and cruel. Joyous and glum. Bitter and tender. And his thoughts on fiction . . . ? You wonder: are they, too, all of these complex and oppositional things? Read on, I say, read on!

Hey Bryan. Maybe we should start with a downer, with some complaining about the life of a writer?

Sure. When I write, even though I try to have a pretty ergonomic setup, I spend a lot of time hunched over my keyboard. When I'm "really"

writing, like really into it and not thinking about my posture, my nose is practically touching my keyboard. If I do this for a couple of hours my back really hurts. I've seen doctors who have told me I should make it a habit to stand up and walk around every 15 or 30 minutes. But I'm so easily distracted. I don't even like getting up to pee when I'm writing. When I come back it takes tremendous effort just to focus again. I'm tempted, all over again, to check my email or reread the entire Internet.

Perfect, that was perfectly depressing. Nice job! Now maybe we should talk about something good?

I actually really like writing, and it's really lucky to be able to do professionally the thing that you like. Most people aren't so lucky, and so I would say that the number one good thing about being a writer is being a writer. The really cool thing is that the more I do it, the more I like it. The sweeter it gets.

Because, look: I'm lucky enough that I get to sit around and write my own weird thoughts for a living, and then when I change out of my pajamas and leave my house (sometimes very late into the day) I get to talk about the weird wonderfulness that is writing.

And they pay me to do this! Crazy! Unambiguously good!

Right? I wish that all would-be writers become writers. At least in terms of making money at it and being happy. Because that's great! You're certainly doing well at it: since we started this interview, your first book Everyone Wants To Be Ambassador To France *has come out and your first edited anthology,* Watchlist: 32 Short Stories by Persons of Interest*, is entering a new printing by a great new publisher, Catapult.*

Can you talk about what it's like to be a new-book-published author, especially in terms of your prior hopes and expectations of the experience?

By and large it's been really great. I think what surprised me most about publishing the first book, then publishing the second, then republishing the first is how hard the actual production process can be. Rounds and rounds of revisions and rewriting. There's the work of promoting the books. For anthologies, there's the work of organizing, coordinating, and

sometimes wrangling 32 different writers and their various agents and translators.

I like the question of how it stacks up to what I expected. The truest answer, I think, is that I'm not quite sure. I've always wanted to publish a book and so feel extremely happy and grateful and lucky that I've managed to publish two of them. That in itself seems like a pretty good accomplishment.

But at the same time, it hasn't changed my life. Maybe more people recognize my name on the Internet., but I feel pretty far away from all of that. I publish the books and I'm happy that they're reaching people and that people seem to be finding enjoyment in them. But I'm already thinking about the next one.

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What, right now, is your favorite story in your collection?

I tend to find myself more drawn to the ones I wrote most recently. "Honeymoon" was the last added to the collection. "Moonless" was also pretty new, as was "Spooky Action at a Distance." I think I was able to do something good with voice in those stories. The voice seems distinct and clean and so is the action. I've gotten the most accolades for "The Fourth Man," and for a long time that was my favorite story. I wrote it knowing pretty clearly what I wanted to achieve both conceptually and emotionally. There's the Impressionistic sections mimicking the Impressionistic paintings that Bean makes, all of the individual and distinct brush strokes coming together to make a fragmented whole. And there's the clear story about the father and the son.

"Honeymoon," as you probably know, is also my favorite. The turn at the end is so warmly surprising and expansive . . . .

My favorite work—even if it's my own work—is always mysterious in some way. It works but I'm not entirely sure how it does it. For "Honeymoon" I had the opening paragraph for a long time a sense of the story's voice. But it took a long time to work beyond that beginning, to get to the point where I was ready to jump to the different Laurents. When I finally figured out that I wasn't going to stick with the honeymooners all the way to the end, I was able to finish the story pretty quickly. I can't really say why I decided to follow the other Laurents around or reverse the flow of time in the story. But once I started doing it, it felt really right.

Is 'mysterious' ever not a wonderful thing in fiction? No, I think. It is never not. What mysterious-types of literature do you feel positively influenced by?

I love the work of Calvino. Someone pointed out in a few of *Everyone* that one of the stories had a *Cosmicomics*-y vibe, and I'll admit to that absolutely. Guilty as charged. I think everything Aimee Bender does is great. Etgar Keret, Jim Shepard, George Saunders. Judy Budnitz wrote three great books and I sometimes find myself wondering what happened to her. I'm always happy to read Murakami, Kobo Abe.

Like everyone else I just started getting into Clarice Lispector, and I'm really happy to have found her. I just got finished teaching *The Hour of the Star* in my class on metafiction. You have to get beyond the fact that nothing happens (which is sort of the point) but I think it's incredibly affecting. I find myself surprised by how moved I am by Macabea's death and feel a weird and not uncomplicated swell of pity for Rodrigo, her author.

What about your own contemporaries?

I'm lucky to have a bunch of friends who are doing just stellar work. Bonnie Nadzam is probably my best friend, which is funny because we ever only talk on the Internet these days. She's an incredible writer, stunning. Everything she does is better than the thing that came before, which of course was incredible. I'm excited that the rest of the world will get to read her new novel, *Lions*, next summer. It's really, really good. She

writes these really wonderful sentences, very flexible and full of life and distinctive, and that should be enough of a talent. But then she also has the skill to put them together into these really compelling and sweeping stories. I hope *Lions* gets all of the good attention that it deserves.

I just started reading *Undermajordomo Minor* by Patrick deWitt and so far am really enjoying it. I think it's fun to discover a newish writer and be a couple of books behind. I did that with Ben Lerner and loved both of his novels. Ditto with Hilary Mantel and her Henry VIII books. What she's doing with history and voice is amazing.

Mantel? That's interesting to hear, as she's not like the rest of those authors; she's a decidedly historical fiction writer. But then again it makes sense: you also tend to draw upon history in some of your stories, though more in the vein of Jim Shepard. We see the collection populated by many real faces of the past: Alan Bean, as you mentioned, Tycho Brahe, Thomas Day, and historical events, too (arctic exploration). Is it fair to draw a line between some of your stories and Shepard's approach?

Certainly. I admire Shepard's work an awful lot and he's someone who's been very nice to me, both personally and professionally. What I think I like about his work best is how clearly it communicates that it's okay to be excited about the world around us. Read about giant man-eating sharks in Australia and want to write about them? Do it! Ditto for hydrogen blimps, Roman centurions, or the Charge of the Light Brigade. Shepard's passions are so diverse and so clear, and the message his work consistently gives off is that it's cool—even necessary—to be into what you're into.

I wrote most of my historical stories while I was also writing the dissertation for my Ph.D. I'd be reading lots of histories and otherwise obscure books and come across anecdotes that really sparked my imagination. Thomas Day, for example, is a real guy who really did that horrible experiment. Same thing with Tycho Brahe, although in real life his moose did even worse. Brahe would race the animal and once, after celebrating a win, fed the moose too much beer. The animal tripped and fell down a flight of stairs and died.

How'd you stumble upon Alan Bean? He's twentieth century, obviously.

He's a figure I had been interested in for an even longer time. I first encountered him in a song by the somewhat obscure British rock group Hefner. I Googled his name and found his paintings. I thought I'd write an essay about him and even arranged to interview him. But the interview went poorly, mostly because I had a pretty entrenched picture of the man and the picture didn't actually reflect who he was. I'd ask him a somewhat leading question, or a question that I thought really "got" him, and it didn't at all. I was trying to interview my imagination and the real life person probably didn't appreciate it all. Still his story stuck with me, so I read some books about the Apollo missions and his autobiography. I drew on the image I had of him in my head and from the bad interview. And then I wrote that story.

I'll admit that I've only been mostly listening to your response – my mind wandered there a moment. I'm still stuck on Hilary Mantel. On "Historical Fiction." The whole weird genre of it. Sometimes I sort of loathe historical fiction novels. Those writers who spend years and years researching some specific place and time so that when their book gets reviewed they'll get applauded not only for doing all the research but for 'lovingly recreating' or 'vividly recapturing' or 'texturally evoking' the whole blah blah blah.

That said: historical fiction in the short story form, as you practice it via personages like Thomas Day, is a far different (and I'll say it: far better) beast. (Har.) It's not like you're a 'historical fiction writer.' Your historical writing is still you thinking, your characters dealing with the world the way you deal with the world.

I don't mean to be flip by answering this so quickly or succinctly, but: yeah sure! I won't deny that I can't escape my own solipsistic impulses. In the end it's always me writing about me. But I guess I'd also say that when I write about something historical, I'm writing about something that I really like. I liked it enough to spend some time researching it (how much varies. I don't want anyone to think that each one requires hours in the library, because not all do. Sometimes a trip to Wikipedia is enough). I'm a big believer that when we communicate what we like, we communicate a lot about ourselves. I'd also say that there's something brave in saying what you like and being enthusiastic about it. When you share like that you're making yourself vulnerable to judgment and

derision. To write about your passions is always to write about yourself. I think there's something brave in that.

This very week (early March 2016), I'm doing "researched-short-stories-a-la-Bryan-Hurt" in my fiction class, which makes me wonder about your own experiences as a student. Can you think back at all on taking creative writing classes at the undergraduate level?

I can *only* think back to my experience of taking creative writing classes at the undergraduate level! It was completely transformative. I basically went to college because that's what one does after high school, and I'm lucky I got in at all. I only applied to one college, the only one that I could find that didn't require me to write an admission essay. Which is somewhat ironic because I had some vague notion that I wanted to be a writer since I liked reading novels and had been a writer for my high school newspaper. I enrolled in a journalism program in college but really didn't like it because the beginning classes were focused on the minutiae. I think I only took one class on grammar, which was designed to weed people like me out of the major. I ended up transferring to another college and enrolling in a fiction writing class.

After the first class I knew that this was exactly what I was looking for, an opportunity to write and talk very deeply about the stuff that I was already super passionate about. It changed my whole relationship with school. It sounds stupid now, but I really didn't know that you could study the stuff that you loved. Up until that point I'd always thought school was a chore. So a thing that I try to communicate in my classes is that this stuff can be fun.

Wait. What? It can be fun?

It should be fun! I think when you teach creative writing you're teaching people that it's okay to love the stuff that they love. You're giving them the tools to make more of that stuff in the world. I also try to show students just how big and inclusive the world of fiction is.

Fine, I'll try to let students have fun. Lend a hand? What types of authors do you teach in your fiction courses?

Lots of different authors, at least I try! I worry a lot about teaching or reinforcing my own idiosyncratic aesthetic. One of the best things a student ever said about me was, "I have no idea what kind of writer he is." That said, lately I've really enjoyed teaching Helen Oyeyemi's *Mr. Fox*, which is my kind of strange. Students like it too and there's a broad range of styles but all united behind a strong voice. I recently read *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel with my beginning fiction class and that was a big hit. A lot of students come to creative writing classes because they love genre work and are inspired by movies and TV. Mandel's book worked well because it deals in genre but also shows what literature can do that movies and TV can't.

Last fall I was babbling to you about how I try to get my students to have intention in their stories – that they should have a quasi-plan (a topic, a tone, a tension, something) for what they're writing.

You looked at me like I was crazy. Remember?

As I recall (and we were three or four bars deep into our evening) you were suggesting something more than a "quasi-plan" or intention, which I have absolutely nothing against. If we don't start with intentions or ideas what do we have? But I've got beer-colored memories of words like "outlines" and "paragraph counts" being bandied about, as if we can do the work of writing before we sit down and put words on the page. Maybe we can do that but my gut tells me that this work is going to be limited. It treats the story like a problem that we can solve, sort of like one of those middle school algebra equations where you only get credit if you show your work.

Paragraph counts! I must have been altered. I don't ask students for that, but I do ask them to try to have some intention. I think it saves a lot of time if they know the key ingredients in the story they're writing. Such as: tone. Problem. Character or characters. Not so much what happens . . . just a sense of the situation and how they, the students, want to feel about it. (This might be protective, in some ways: when I can

tell that a student has some sort of intent in a story, it makes commenting on it so much easier: I can help them realize their vision only when they have a vision.)

That makes sense. I guess one thing that I try to avoid nowadays is Scooby Doo-ing the stories we workshop, pulling off a mask and saying, "Your story was *this* all along!" It's fun to do but I think it can also be alienating. You're telling writers that you know their stories better than they do. And maybe you do. But I don't think it's super helpful.

Most writers I come across have some sort of plan or intention, and so you're trying to help them make the best version of what they want to make. At the same time, I really believe in the power of the subconscious in storytelling. I think our plans or intentions only get us so far. When you read and workshop stories you really need to watch and listen. Sometimes stories are going to do things that writers didn't intend, and those things might be all the more interesting because they were accidents. I think part of my job as a workshop leader is to help create complexity and add problems to a story. If I'm doing it well, hopefully I'm also doing it gently and with an eye to easing some difficulty and increasing understanding.

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How does revision work for you – more personally than with students?

I tend to work on a draft until I get to a point where I get stuck and can't go further. When I get to this point I usually go back and begin retyping it. Usually somewhere in this retyping process old things fall away. Stuff that I thought was necessary seems silly and unnecessary. New paths present themselves. If they're interesting paths I follow them until I get stuck again. And then I start over.

I usually don't start over right away. Sometimes there are a couple of days of working against the current, thinking that if I just push on I'll break through to something else. But that has never happened for me. Eventually I tire of the effort and go back to the beginning, retype, get a little bit farther. It's not an efficient model, although it works okay for stories.

I'm working on a novel now and I'm learning that this process is a lot different. I feel like I need to be a little more strategical about how I approach the writing so I'm not pushing against the current quite so often. Right now that means thinking in smaller and more self-contained scenes. Trusting that I can always hit "return" twice on my keyboard in order to create some white space that lets me jump away to another moment where I can focus my efforts. I'm not done with a first draft and so it will be interesting to see what all of these pieces look like when I try to put them together.

Want to talk a little about the novel?

It's about an airport and a guy whose job is collecting signatures for a wealth management firm. Like he flies to a rich person's house, says, "sign here, here, and here," and then flies home again. In the novel he's trying to fly to a collect a signature in a remote mountain town but becomes stuck in an airport.

Nice! And strange. And weird. Will Kanye be in it? (I ask because you're always itching to talk about Kanye.)

I'm a huge fan of Kanye West! For my birthday a couple of years ago my wife bought me tickets to go see him perform with Jay Z for their *Watch the Throne* tour. It was great! And a couple of months ago I saw him do *808s* at The Hollywood Bowl. Also great but conceptually weird and postmodern.

I don't care much about his personality or celebrity (especially his tweets of late—the Cosby in particular makes me like him and his art a whole lot less), and I don't think he's the best rapper in the world. But I think he consistently makes good work and he seems to follow his

interests wherever they take him. He takes risks but he also seems to be very aware of his audience. He seems to want to take us with him, wherever he's going. I know part of this is commercial. If he went too far too fast, maybe we wouldn't go there with him. But I also think it's kind of generous, like: "I'm going to do my thing and do it the best I can, but I also want to make it nice for you." I know I could be describing a lot of artists in that way, but I think Kanye's pretty uniquely talented in hitting that sweet spot between being experimental and accessible. I don't know what this says about fiction exactly, but it seems to be a pretty good description of my tastes for all kinds of art.

Uniquely talented. Aware. Not really commercial but open to it, respectful of it. Risk-taking. All that describes someone else I know, Bryan, and now everyone who reads this will – hopefully! – think of you when they see Kanye!

And . . . vice versa?

(Thanks, Bryan!)