

A Talk with a Novelist: An Interview with Gabriel Brownstein

Interviewed by Stephen Pasqualina

*Gabriel Brownstein is a critically acclaimed novelist and creative writing professor at St. John's University. He has authored two published works of fiction: a collection of short stories, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Apt. 3W (Norton) which earned him the PEN/Hemingway award in 2002, and a novel entitled *The Man from Beyond*, published in September 2005. He has been a lecturer in the Writing Program at SUNY Stony Brook and has written multiple essays and book reviews for *The Boston Globe* and *The Village Voice*.*

SP: *What, do you think, is the role of the novel in 21st century America?*

GB: I do not know what the novel's role is generally, and its role when it comes to specific books and individual readers is infinite in its happy variety. A lot of people have written about the decline of the novel, but when I look at the world and I see how many, many things are in decline, I feel the novel's condition is relatively benign. Consider the decline of political discourse, or of the Hollywood movie--in the quality, imaginativeness, and the number of people paying attention. We are living in some golden age of blogs and video games and real estate sales but none of these things seem to offer much in the way of consolation or introspection or even genuinely satisfying entertainment.

I really don't feel capable of speaking on the twenty-first century except to say that it's gotten off to a rotten start. I don't feel capable of speaking on the novel, except to say that without it my life would be barren and dull.

SP: *How do you compare this generation of fiction writers to past generations of the 20th century?*

GB: I think that fiction writers have been doing pretty well, in the U.S. and elsewhere. It's very difficult to compare contemporary writers with the writers who have come before them. Even in the 1920s, when the U.S. novel was really roaring along, a lot of readers took the position that it was in decline. And by the end of that decade, many of its greatest writers (Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston) were about to be forgotten, and not too many years later, others who had seemed significant (Dos Passos, Fitzgerald) suffered deep declines in their reputations. But is Dos Passos better than Roth? Really? Hurston better than Morrison? I don't know. It's difficult often to see who is writing good work now, especially among young writers. The attention is doled out in ways that seems arbitrary; weak writers are hyped, good writers are ignored. But it has always been thus.

I'm not saying that novel writing is as good as it has ever been. The novel is now a marginal art form, and it used to be at the center of the culture, or so I am told. But I think writers are, for the most part, holding up their end of the bargain.

SP: How do you measure the success of a novel?

GB: This is impossible to answer in any simple way.

Surely, a novel can be successful aesthetically, can be aesthetically brilliant and superb without ever finding a publisher. Surely, this happens all the time. I know of at least one brilliant short story by an acquaintance who is a gifted but largely unknown and that story has never been published, and I don't think my gifted friend even wants to publish it. He showed it to a bunch of his friends in a writers' group--this was many years ago--many of the writers in that group have since become published and successful writers. We all agreed that this story was a total, absolute knock-out. We were all in awe. And I love, love, love this story and will remember it all my days. But is it successful? Certainly it did not meet its writer's ambition, and that ambition was to reach readers beyond his group of friends. I think finding a reader marks the completion of a work, that a work will always be incomplete

until it finds a reader--a stranger--who enjoys the book and thereby makes it whole.

SP: A literary critic (I'll find her name) said recently that postmodernart is in a state of exhaustion. Do you feel that the novel and otherart forms are at this said state?

GB: There are a few ways to answer this question. The first is to say that a lot of really excellent work being published right now has a lot of characteristics associated with postmodernism. Lorrie Moore's recent stories--which are some of my favorite stories being written--have characteristics that could get called postmodern. And there's a wonderful writer named Linh Dinh I just discovered whose poetical fables could probably merit the tag. And I read an excellent, really fun and super smart novel by my friend Matthew Sharpe--it's called Jamestown, it's coming out in the spring--and he's pretty postmodern, too. And the list could go on.

The second way to answer the question might be to cite Donald Barthelme. Barthelme, when asked a similar question in 1985, said that aesthetic and philosophical movements are constantly being reinvented and that they may or may not go out of style, but they don't become obsolete. And this is important to remember in the case of postmodernism, because even work now that is powerful and would be hard to categorize in any way as postmodern--for instance, Marilyn Robinson's Gilead, one of my favorite novels of the last several years--such work takes strength if not in the writer's mind than certainly in this reader's mind from its refusal to engage in postmodern hijinx. So the work of the postmodernists is there even when it's absent.

The last way to answer the question would be to question the terms. I have no idea if any of the three writers I cited in the first answer to the question would want to call themselves "postmodern;" I'm not sure how Marilyn Robinson would respond to the term. The term itself has been used in so many ways--as a description of a time period, as a description of an aesthetic sense, as a description of a philosophical movement, as a synonym for "difficult" or "experimental"--that it's gotten pretty hard to use the word; it's

hard even to use it ironically. I try to avoid it, except in the classroom where I have a professional obligation to wrestle with it.

I sometimes wonder about what motivates the talk about postmodernism being dead. Lurking beneath such talk--and I'm not accusing you of this Stephen; it's a great interview question, and I'm having fun answering it--but lurking beneath these sorts of statements sometimes is a desire for things "postmodern" to cease, not so much so that something new can take their place, but so that we can just relax and get back to the old ways and not worry so much about problems of signification so much anymore and just tell stories the way we used to . . . And the answer to that desire, I think, is: Sorry, no. We can't go back to telling stories the way we used to. We have to tell stories the way we tell them now.

SP: As a novelist, do you find the success of the "pop" novel (i.e. Danielle Steele, Dan Brown) discouraging?

GB: The gap between serious and commercial writing has been widening since Dickens or so. I've never read Dan Brown or Danielle Steele, but I assume they write as most writers do--writing what they are capable of and drawn to, and happily for them, they are able to write books that millions want to read while flying trans-continently or slurping daiquiris on the beach. There are a lot of serious writers who bitch about the popularity of the pop novel--there's an interesting essay on the subject by Jonathan Franzen, who to be fair is more upset about the lack of popularity of the serious novel than he is about the success of the pop novel. But I think this gap between popularity and seriousness is not something to be too, too upset about. A lot of so-called serious writers actively disdain pop novels; they don't want their novels to be pop. And publishers are in business, and they have to earn their salaries and stay afloat and make money, and they can do that through Dan Brown better than they can through Jonathan Franzen; the reasons why seem too obvious to state, even if, very occasionally, a Franzen is marketed extremely skillfully, and the Franzen makes the big bucks. I liked and admired Jonathan Franzen's book, *The Corrections*. But I think it's important to realize that the explosion in interest in such a book, even before it is widely read, is as much a trick of marketing as it is a trick of good writing. And I have no idea how the marketing trick works.

SP: Describe your own prose style.

GB: I don't know if I can describe my own prose style. It's a little like describing the way I walk or my smile. It's very intimately connected with the way I am. I could describe someone else's smile, I might even be able to imitate the way someone else walks, but with each sentence I write I'm not so much going for a particular style per se, as trying to get the words right. To tell you the truth, when I look back at the two books I've published, I see a writer who is still pretty young, who is still maturing, who has reached a certain level of achievement but who is still trying to find his way. So--and I guess this contradicts what I said about smiles and walks--my prose style is something I'm trying to achieve, something I'm striving towards. It's there, but it is in a constant state of evolution towards what I hope will be something better.

If I think about myself as a particular kind of writer, I'd say I was a New York writer. I think my work couldn't exist without the city, and it is in very basic ways about the city, and responds to the city, and when I imagine my ideal reader, I imagine that reader on the subway.

SP : Do you consider yourself a postmodernist?

GB : You ask if I see my writing as postmodern or myself as a postmodernist. I don't. Like I said, it's not a word I'm totally comfortable with. This is not to say that I'd disagree if someone said to me, 'Hey, that's pretty postmodern what you did there.' There are characteristics of my work that make it fit under that heading. But it's not a heading I'd reach for if someone asked me to describe myself.

SB: What role, if any, does that imagined reader play in your writing process?

GB: I don't imagine a reader while I am writing. I try not to, at least.

As soon as I start imagining a reader, I start to worry about whether or not the reader will like me, will like what I'm writing, and that worry is catastrophic--as deadly in writing as it is anywhere else in life. You simply can't focus on what you're doing if you're worrying about whether someone else likes you. I read an interview with Clint Eastwood who said something similar about his movies: As soon as you start thinking about the audience, the whole thing falls apart.

While writing, I try to pursue the internal logic of the piece, and I really believe that works have their own internal logic. William Gass, the writer and philosopher, has compared finding this internal logic (my words, not his) to mixing a good martini. It's a matter of seeking balance, and the relative combinations of words takes a lot longer than the relative combinations of gin, vermouth, and olive, but again, the martini maker best pleases his guests by following the martini's pattern rather than by worrying if his guests will like his martini or if it will work out okay. This analogy is falling apart. A novel is not like a martini, because you do not make your novel distinctly for each individual guest ("Oh, you like your novel dry?"), you make your novel not even for your own solitary pleasure (in which case you might be writing a diary), but to fill some larger aesthetic ambition which by necessity resides outside of your house or your life. This is I suppose where the reader comes in, not in the act of writing, but as some kind of basic assumption that underpins the whole process. The reader, to get back to the analogy, is not some specific guest who likes a kind of martini, but is some ideal guest who likes the perfect martini. Some hypothetical other who could share ideally one's appreciation of one's own ideal. The reader is in this sense a personal standard in the writer's mind, and not so much a specific person with subjective quirks. (Those imagined subjective actual people with their personal quirks haunt the writing process at its margins, and most of them tell you that your novel sucks, though from time to time I write something that I think a particular friend might find funny, and I enjoy this particular friend's imagined chuckle.) But this question of readers goes beyond process, and it speaks to ambition.

SP: You have recommended that writers write longhand with a pencil and paper. Why do you prefer to write longhand?

GB: I write longhand most of the time, but there are probably not too many people who do that. With my students, I'm not so much concerned about how anybody puts together a first draft, whether they do it on a computer or on paper or however, but I do encourage my students to try to revise their stories and papers away from the computer. My sense is that a lot of them don't, that a lot of revision happens on the computer screen. And my sense is that the editing devices on Microsoft Word focus the writer's attention on the surface elements of the text--you can spend days putting in and taking out commas, or cutting and pasting paragraphs back and forth, shuffling sentences in different orders. And my sense is that for a lot of beginning writers, the questions asked by Microsoft Word are distracting from bigger questions posed in their own writing. This really comes from my own experiences writing. I can get sucked into cutting and pasting and comma shifting--it's so much fun! But after an hour or two of it, I lose all sense of my own work, the work feels dead, and I don't know where to go next. For me, word processing seems to work primarily along a spatial metaphor--taking pieces of text and moving them from one place to another. I am very concerned about the way my language appears on the page. But my primary sense of language is temporal, that is of the order of story, the order of the telling, which for me is close to vocal. When I write in pencil and paper, I am emphasizing those aspects of the work. There are other ways in which, for me, writing longhand is more fun and more effective. I am a very fast typist, and type pretty close to the speed of my thoughts. But when I write longhand, what's on the page never catches up to what's in my mind, so I begin thinking in much larger chunks of narrative; my head is always a paragraph ahead of my hand, and this extends the period of my concentration. It's also a sensual pleasure for me. I like the smell of the sharpened pencil, which goes very nicely with the smell of coffee. I like the feel of the pencil on the page. I like to sharpen. I like my pencils very sharp. And I like that the pencil-written page doesn't have the professional look of the page on the computer screen.

But this is all highly personal. I have read other writers' little love songs to their typewriters or Macintoshes. There's no rule here, no best tool for writing. Don DeLillo has compared his typewriter to the Parthenon and said that the shapes of the words as they appear on the typed page are of primary concern in his writing. I read an interview in which Richard Powers said he

wrote in a dark room on a bed with his keyboard remotely attached to a big screen TV on which his words appear.

SP: Why do you write?

GB: I think the short answer is, I write because I like to write. The slightly longer answer is, I like the sound of my own voice. The more solemn answer is, in writing I discover who I am and I explore my imagination and how I conceive of the world.

George Orwell has a famous essay that tries to answer this question--"Why I Write"--and he answers in a typically Orwell fashion, by making a list that seems on the one hand stern and objective and on the other self mocking and sly. His first answer is "sheer egotism" and he goes on from that to list other things. That first answer, though, seems to be the best one. Sheer egotism, that's why I write. Joan Didion wrote a remarkable essay that uses Orwell's title, "Why I Write," and she says she uses his title because she likes the sound of those three words, the sound being "I, I, I."

But, on the other hand, I don't think this kind of egocentric creation is about making a monument to oneself. It doesn't come from a sense of knowing oneself and thinking--hey, I'm great, I must build a monument to myself. It's the opposite. I think serious writing is a fairly neurotic obsessive activity engaged in by people who value language so much that they do not ever really know what to say. In her essay, Didion says she is a writer not because she is a good writer, but because in writing she feels most herself, and she talks about the ways that her writing tells her what to say; it is the writing, she says, that gives her the words. This is very true for me. I do not know what to write before I begin writing. I find myself in my writing. In this sense a novel is a kind of heuristic, even if it has no given form or structure; it is a form through which one discovers oneself and the world.