

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOE BAUMANN

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THE MRR INTERVIEW



Joe Baumann is Assistant Professor of English at St. Charles Community College, where he teaches literature and creative writing. He is an intensely prolific author of many published works, and he has been a catalyst in the SCC English department through his intrepid teaching and writing and associated functions.

JOE BAUMANN SPEAKS

Since joining the faculty at SCC, Baumann developed and was instrumental in implementing an 18-hour certificate program for creative writing. In spring 2019, having secured funds through an arts grant, Baumann set in motion the Missouri Writers Series showcasing three regional writers – Allison Coffelt, Jamie D'Agostino, and Meagan Cass – who visited SCC creative writing classes for readings, discussion of writerly craft and Q&A during the day and gave public readings in the evening. Baumann is the founder and the editor-in-chief of *The Gateway Review*, a journal which publishes magic realism, surrealism and the new fabulism twice annually. Baumann is the author of *Ivory Children* (Red Bird Chapbooks 2013). In 2019 he was named a Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction.

Baumann recently completed a cycle of 10 stories in which the Biblical plagues are visited upon the contemporary world. One of them has just been published as a stand-alone chapbook, *Terranium*, by The Head and Hand Press. Baumann's short stories have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize three times.

The interview took place June 5, 2020.

– Michael Kuelker
SCC Professor (Emeritus) of English

POSTSCRIPT

Since the publication of *Mid Rivers Review* 2020, Baumann has secured publication for three books. One is the short story collection *Sing With Me at the Edge of Paradise*, which was named the inaugural winner of the Iron Horse Literary Review/Texas Tech University Press First Book Award. Another is *I Know You're Out There Somewhere* through Deep Hearts YA. Both books will be published in 2022. Additionally, his story collection *The Plagues*, will be published by Cornerstone Press in 2023.

MID RIVERS REVIEW is a literary journal published annually by the English department of St. Charles Community College.

SCC offers a Certificate of Specialization in creative writing. This 18-hour certificate program provides students the opportunity to hone their skills and abilities in a variety of forms of creative writing, as well as the practices of publishing writing.

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MRR: Your stories are a RIOT. I want to explore that with you. Your short stories break down order and yet they have such control on your part in terms of bringing forth a narrative. So when you break down order, how then do you determine a center-point, a guide on how to accomplish the story?

JB: I often don't know the answer to that question for an individual story when I start. When I start writing a story... I like to write about very weird things. Things where something very bizarre is happening often times in the world we normally inhabit.

What I often do is I come up with some wacky premise and just kind of start writing and I don't know where I'm headed, but more often than not, at some point I will write a sentence or have a character think about something, and a little switch will go off inside of me and I'll go, "Oh, there it is. That's the centerpiece. That's what this story is quote-unquote is 'about.' And then I'm able to circle back once I have a full draft and really have that center point in mind in deciding what stays, what goes, what needs to get elaborated on, what needs to get cut down. And so that's how I end up there.

So I almost never actually know what that anchoring thing is going to be going into writing something. Sometimes I do but oftentimes I don't. I kind of force myself to stumble around for a while until I find something that makes me go, 'Oh! There it is.'

MRR: So in 'Orbit,' that strangely compelling blowhole of Fergus McMillan's - was that the place where it started?

JB: That was the premise that kicked things off. Whenever I sit down to start a story, I just come up with some goofy weird thing. And I can almost never remember after I've written them what made me come up with that starting point ... so if you're hoping to find that out, I might disappoint you. For this particular story some person is staring at the back of this guy's head and he's got this weird, like, growth/blowhole-looking thing and it went from there, and at some moment in writing that story, I realized that, 'oh wait, the girl that's looking at him is in love with him despite these things that she sees about him that shouldn't make her be in love with him. That then became the center-point, and I re-circled the story re-thinking about that.

MRR: So much is happening internally with the characters inhabiting your fiction, including that woman.

JB: Yeah, and when I talk about the center-point, the thing that clicks, it's almost always some internal kind of thing. Most of the time that weird premise I come up with is something external, so a character having a blowhole or a funhouse existing that lets people to transform themselves. Those come very quickly. And I tell my students this all the time, you can write an entertaining story that only relies on 'here's this wacky premise,' but I've always thought that to tell a really great story, you need there to be something meaningful that's happening inside somebody. Most of the time that's the part that I am trying to stumble upon, and then my goal is to make that the center of the piece, whatever is going on under the surface for somebody.

MRR: It comes as a surprise to that female character who's looking at the blowhole how powerful her feelings are and where they're located in her. And I love the ending: "A pleasing nausea, blending sour-sweet vertigo and the coppery taste of pressure placed on a blue-black bruise, followed her for a week. So, she tells herself, she'll admire Fergus from afar, waiting for his blowhole to whisper her name, to create a gust of air that the two of them can ride up into the sky, where they'll be able to taste the stars and marry the moonlight in the wordless black, whirling an elliptic track around the sun in a silent vacuum, a place where sight and smell count for nothing." (Baumann "Orbit")

Such a beautiful close. At the same time, you seem exquisitely attuned to the value of the kick ass opening line. Two of my favorite from your stories come from "Takers," which opens "A girl kisses a boy and takes his earliest memory," a fascinating idea, and "Numbskull," which begins 'Tobias Smallworthy stabbed himself in the eyeballs at Ada Warner's annual kegger.'

How hard do you work on the opening line?

JB: If somebody wants to be able to figure out where I first got the idea for a story, you can usually look to that first line. I like to just sort of throw readers into the premise of the story right away. Part of that stems from, I edit my own

literary magazine and from reading 100-plus submissions in a several month period, you kind of know very early on, at least I do as an editor, if I want to keep reading a story. And so to me as a writer, it's really important to get a reader invested even if it's just through them going, 'okay, I'd really like to know what that means,' or whatever it is that gets them into a story very, very early. Most of the time, at least when I'm drafting, and it doesn't often go away. We talk about revision. That first line almost always sticks around because that's usually the first thing I've come up with.

For example, in that story "Numbskull," I had just gotten this picture in my head, and again I don't know where it came from, of a kid stabbing himself in the eye with a fork but it not hurting him. And so that's where I started the story. Because if that's the first thing that got into my head, I feel like that's the first thing that should get into a reader's head. So I always try to make sure I have something that grabs a reader right away. That's where you can see into my own writing head by just looking at those opening lines, for sure.

MRR: And then there's the story ("Do to Me What I Can Do to You") where Ricky wakes up and he's minus his left hand. What is it about the transformation of the body that makes you curious as a writer to write through these ideas?

JB: If I would describe the one obsession that has wended its way through my writing for the last several years, the weirdness does often have to do with a person's body.

If I could articulate a conscious reason for that – there could be all sorts of subconscious unconscious problems that I'm not aware of that I'm revealing about myself – but I think part of it has to do with our physical bodies are so connected, whether we want them to be or not to our interior selves. There's all sorts of talk about body image and then there's also just, we can't always control our physical selves when we talk about illness, injury, those sorts of things. I've found that it's a good through-way to do that sort of pairing of the whatever's going on on the outside with what's going on on the inside. So whatever it is that a character is experiencing internally, I find that having the external thing have to do with some bizarre transformation that's happening to their body is a really nice through-way into linking those two things together.

You are very much right that I've done a lot with the human body. Part of the reason I think for that is there's just so many things that can be wrong with it or different about it, and so the possibilities seem very, at the moment, still feel quite endless to me as a writer in terms of those things.

MRR: Where did that curiosity and delight about magic realism come from? When did that develop for you?

JB: There's a couple of points in my, we'll call it literary career, which includes my academic career, that sort of gets to that. Probably the first of them, as I think is the case for a lot of writers, I had a high school teacher who introduced us to a variety of very unique writers. When I was a senior in high school, for my college credit English class, our big final research project was to research an "ism" and write about it. I can't remember how I stumbled on it but I stumbled on magic realism, was the thing I researched.

So I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when I was 18. Read a bunch of Jorge Luis Borges' work. And that was one starting point. Then the other big ones, when I was a graduate student at Truman, I took a studies in short story course where we read six writers' short stories, and let's see if I can remember who they all were. There was Edgar Allen Poe, who doesn't really write magic realism but certainly the super- natural was part of his work. Same thing with Nathaniel Hawthorne. But then we read a bunch a stuff by Borges, Julio Cortázar, Clarice Lispector, these writers who all wrote in the bizarre or the strange.

So that was point number two. And then point number three was probably when I was doing my Ph.D., the writer in residence in Louisiana was a woman named Kate Bernheimer. She does a lot of work in fairy tales. And I don't really do exactly the same thing , but she sort of deluged us with this writing that was in this genre. I got finally, much later than I should have, introduced to the work of Amy Bender, who is an iconic writer of the magic realist genre in contemporary writing. Of course there's Jeanette Winterson and a whole host of others that I got introduced to from her. And I just found that when I started writing these things for myself, something clicked.

I had spent a lot of time before that experience writing more straight realism, and I was okay at it, but I wasn't as good at it as I became at writing in this sort of bizarre, weird vein once I knew it was a thing I could try. That's the course that charted me to this style of writing.

MRR: One of your recent projects is a cycle of stories on plagues. I find that fascinating particularly because of our current historical moment. What drew you to the Biblical plagues and to write about all ten of them?

JB: The project stemmed out of a failed project which was really just, I had this idea to write a story in which a contemporary family who was deeply religious was suddenly struck by all ten of the plagues, they were gonna to show up in this short story. That became a bit of a wreck, so I had abandoned it. This was like five years ago, I tried this and it hadn't worked. And then about two years after that, I thought, what if I do one story for each of the plagues? And that became much more manageable thing.

I'm not sure what got me on that notion in the first place. I was raised in a Catholic household and so I knew the story of the plagues. And I hadn't really done much with any Biblical re-tellings in any kind of capacity. But when I realized that I could try writing 10 short stories, one for each of the plagues, the notion of the challenge of that was a lot of fun. What would that look like in a modern-day setting? Once I realized I didn't need to try to do all ten plagues in one short story, it became a fun challenge to try out.

MRR: Where are you in the fulfillment of this project on the plagues?

JB: They're all done. All 10 stories are written, and actually all 10 stories have individually been published in a variety of outlets. The full collection, I've been submitting it here and there. There's a, I don't know if I want to call it a contest, but it's been for a while a finalist for a book prize. And so I'm waiting to hear about that because that will come with the collection being published.

It exists. Now it's waiting for somebody to print the darn thing.

MRR: What was your first published short story?

JB: Let me think about that ... I remember the very first published piece of writing was actually a short essay that I published when I was in graduate school about seeing a jellyfish on a beach. The first short story, I think it came after that. I think it was a piece of flash fiction. I had a little cluster of pieces of flash fiction that I was sending out in probably 2010 and several of them got accepted in places kind of at the same time. What the first one was is hard for me to remember. They were all very short little flash fiction.

The first short story of particular heft that I had published was a story called "The Last Farmland in the Country," which was about a guy who is a farmer whose wife shoots him in the face with birdshot and he slowly turns into a scarecrow. And that was the first story where the fascination with bodily transformation took hold, I think, too. And that was the first piece that I had published in a print magazine. All the other ones before that were in online journals. This one was in a print magazine and so I got copies that got mailed to me. That one I remember.

MRR: I'd like to ask you about the panel of student writers that you have chaired on two occasions at SCC Democracy Days [2018, 2019]. You titled the panel "The Prose of Protest" and your students presented and discussed their original writing. What is the terrific story you read on those occasions?

JB: "Tasters." I have a whole collection of stories that all are one-word "ers" so that gets a little confusing.

It's about a young woman ... The backdrop of the story is that there is some kind of famine happening and she discovers that her musculature will regenerate rapidly and painlessly so she starts selling off bits of herself as food and people flock to this because they are desperate and hungry.

MRR: I love that story. So powerful and affecting. What drew you to that story as a piece of discourse for Democracy Days?

JB: First of all, I wanted to make sure I was reading something too because I was asking students to share their work and felt like I should have something as well.

That ended up being about a number of things, I think. The commodification of the body, the viewing of human beings as property in a way and a rallying cry for autonomy and that story of thing, and so it felt like a decent piece to include in the notion of 'the prose of protest' in a way that I hope is not sort of hit you over the head with a hammer style, which has its place, for sure, but asking people, why do we view, in this case specifically women, as a thing to be bought or sold. That was the reason I thought it fit with the sensibilities of that panel.

MRR: What is literally the last piece of writing you've worked on?

JB: Just a few hours ago ... I'm in the revising phase of a story that underwent a unique transformation for me. I had to write this story as a piece of flash fiction and the premise is that this young man, his best friend and his best friend's girlfriend each have unpleasant scars on their bodies from various things and he discovers that he can temporarily make those go away. So I tried to tell the story as a piece of flash fiction and something about it wasn't really working, and then so I realized well, maybe I should make it a full blown, full-length story. So I did that and today I was going through a printout that I had marked up already and was making some changes to it. That's literally, earlier this afternoon, the last thing that I was working on.



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