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Interview with Ben Percy

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INTERVIEW WITH BEN PERCY

Hailed as one of America's most brilliant young writers, Benjamin Percy has published prolifically in both fiction and nonfiction and has written two books, Refresh, Refresh: Stories (Graywolf, 2007) and The Language of Elk (Carnegie Mellon, 2006). His work has garnered such prizes as the Pushcart Prize and the Paris Review's Plimpton Prize, and has been featured in collections such as the Best American Short Stories. Percy teaches creative writing, composition, and literature at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.



CR: How do you write stories that resonate with an increasingly diverse culture/audience?

BP: I don't think about that. If you consider your audience too carefully, if you worry about the faces hovering around your computer screen, you'll either freeze up or try to be too accommodating. I just write the stories that come boiling out of me. Luckily, they strike a nerve in many.

CR: What element must a story have to succeed aesthetically? Is there any such element in the first place?

BP: It begins, in most cases, with an image. If you think about writing as a subject, most of us are trained—from grammar school through college—to write thoughts. That, after all, is the essence of the essay; “here is what I’m thinking.” Cerebral writing has a cerebral effect. And I don’t want my audience to sit and ponder their navels. I want them to feel. I want to drag them down the rabbit hole. I want them to be alive twice: once in their world, once in the world of the

page. How do I try to accomplish this? Through imagism. Every moment in my stories I can imagine happening as if a film reel is turning slowly in my skull. My job is to replicate that with ink and paper. Which “ain’t easy.” But you can take a stab at it by constantly orienting your audience, reminding them of that overturned vase here or that breeze coming in the window there. And, even more importantly, if I want to convey some idea (despair, joy, etc.) I try to make it visual rather than talking about it. And if I think about the writers I admire most, I suppose that’s the essence of what they’re doing.

CR: What is your primary emotion as you begin to craft a new piece?

BP: An electric kind of excitement.

CR: What is your primary emotion as you finish a piece?

BP: Fear; that it isn’t good enough.

CR: Describe your relationship to your readers. Do you have obligations or responsibilities? At what point does your fiction stop belonging to you?

BP: You are obligated to change [your readers] so that they emerge from the page with their vision slightly shifted. And, heck, it doesn’t hurt to entertain them while you’re at it. Your work ceases to belong to you the moment it’s published. I’ve discovered that what I intended and what an audience takes away from my work are often two entirely different things.

CR: A number of the stories in *The Language of Elk* and *Refresh, Refresh* seem to deal with “masculinity” as a theme. Is there an intentional effort on your part to flesh out this theme, or would you say that it’s a byproduct stemming from the characters that you happen to find yourself interested in? That is to say, do your stories typically begin with a thematic idea that you’d like to explore, or rather with individual characters?

BP: They grow out of images witnessed, characters encountered, places visited. All of this comes together like a bird's nest with button and a ribbon and spoon woven into the branches and grass of imagination. I never begin with a theme in mind. Theme grows organically out of character and plot. To approach fiction any other way is to craft an unnatural message-driven story that will probably come across like an after-school special.

CR: As with many writers, the idea of “place” seems to be an important element in your fiction. In what ways do you see “place” or “displacement” at work in your writing?

BP: They're symbiotic. Perhaps this grows out of my own experience as an outsider. Or perhaps it's a human affliction, something everyone knows. Place, as I see it, is central to story. Maybe this comes out of my experience with theater. Set the stage. Then move your characters around on it.

CR: Concerning the teaching of creative writing, what great stories do you often find yourself teaching that you feel are perhaps being overlooked or under-used in American writing classes? What writers or individual stories do you find yourself returning to often for personal enjoyment and as teaching tools?

BP: For my classes: Denis Johnson's book of short stories *Jesus' Son*, for its spare lyricism and its unreliability. Richard Yates—any of his stories—for their careful carpentry and bleak resonance. Ron Carlson for his humor and his economy. Flannery O'Connor for her plotting and her willingness to take risks. For me: Cormac McCarthy. One of the greatest writers of this time, of any time.