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The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2016, vol. 10-11, iss. [1], pp. 5-10

ISBN 978-80-210-8690-6

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138472>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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“I didn’t know you could do this!”

An interview with Mark Anthony Jarman

« Je ne savais pas qu’on pouvait faire ça! »

Un entretien avec Mark Anthony Jarman

Interviewed by / Interrogé par Jason Blake

JB You seem attracted to Central Europe, as well as Italy. Is there a specific reason for the attraction – that is, how did it all begin?

MAJ It wasn’t all at once; one thing led to another and there was a series of coincidences and chances. I’d been to Italy and looked at the map and thought, Well, there’s Croatia, right across the Adriatic, it’s close, must be old Roman sites, and cheaper than Italy. I had an invite to a short story conference in Vienna, got a really cheap flight to Venice, and then I thought of Trieste, because it’s close to Venice and James Joyce had lived and written there and met Italo Svevo and some Freudians. Then an e-mail out of the blue arrived from you in Ljubljana and I invited myself to Ljubljana, which is not far from Trieste. You also gave me names in Zagreb (and Brno) and poet Katia Grubisic’s father has an apartment on the coast near Trogir, which helped the budget. It’s kind of amazing I even found the place; I had trouble finding it the second time I went, even though I’d already been there once. As I said, one thing led to another to randomly steer me that way, but there was always some interest, a feeling of a gap when you hear this name “The Balkans” and wonder what it means. I had Kaplan’s book, *Balkan Ghosts*, but it was also an interest in Joyce, the WW1 front where Hemingway was wounded badly, and a conference up in Vienna as catalyst.

Later I discovered Opatija. I’d rented a room in Canada to a filmmaker whose father was also a filmmaker living in Opatija, so we made our way north to meet him and had some lovely tea in a seaside hotel that felt like the French Riviera. I wouldn’t mind getting back to stay longer. Nabokov stayed there. It’s very close to Ljubljana, has more of the Austrian Empire influence compared to places a little to the south. Trogir and Zadar are solid walled Roman cities and the stonework seems like it’s been there forever. Opatija seems more recent, polite 1800s Habsburg, less Slavic.

I wrote a bit about this in my Trogir piece in *Brick* magazine 99, called “The Drunken Widower Necks with the Virgin Mary in the Trogir Cathedral Razed by Saracens in 1123”. Long title and strange scene in that church.



JB You've had some interesting jobs outside the writing and academic world. Could you pick one or two of them and say whether they've helped you in any way as a writer. ... and weren't you a roofer?

MAJ I was the worst roofer in Edmonton! That was just one summer. I was no good at that, some friends were doing it, so I just went along as an extra pair of hands. I'm sure that roof leaked the first time it rained.

I also drove a truck for the railroad in Edmonton. That was a really good summer job. One year I stayed on all winter, which was unusual, but it was a good union job, so I could save up for travel, for school. I started out in the warehouse, loading and unloading semi-trailers, and I was pretty happy there, but for some reason they wanted me out driving a delivery truck, covering different routes when other drivers booked off, and I realized it was great, you were basically your own boss – just load up the truck and go, all on your own, and I volunteered for a lot of overtime; that was a good job and work is always interesting material for a writer.

JB Didn't Alistair MacLeod also deliver some sort of product in Edmonton?

MAJ He was a milkman in Edmonton, I think Palm Dairies back when they still used horses, the end of an era. He still knew the names of his horses decades later. I used to joke that he might be my father because he was delivering milk right around the time I was born.

I also worked as a janitor. Those jobs are a good contrast to the academic world, it's useful to get out into other worlds. Hockey does the same thing for me. It's kind of an anchor and it's humbling and supplies amazing stories and a different crowd. The ivory tower is not an evil place, but it can be isolated from the rest of the world. It's good to get out.

There's a Richard Rodriguez essay where he was the one on campus who noticed the janitors. A lot of people just don't see you or prefer not to. I was invisible. I'd be coming into work, just as the day staff was getting off and they didn't want to see you. It was the same with the truck. I'd be delivering to someone's house and I'd see a *New Yorker* and say, "That's a great magazine!" They'd look at you as if to say, "We don't want to talk about the *New Yorker* with you; we just want you to hand over the box." And I worked as a busboy in a restaurant. I've talked to people who have worked in restaurants, and they say you can tell which people you're serving have worked those kinds of job. It's good as a contrast to other worlds.

JB Do you ever pick details from those jobs for your stories?

MAJ Yes. I wrote a janitor short story, but I don't think it's published. And in my first book there's "Cowboys Inc." That was a guy I worked with; he was speedy, half-violent.



It was alright if he was on your side, but you wondered if he'd turn on you. That character came directly out of the janitor job. Hockey does that for me too.

JB Here's a question you may not like: how do you define the short story for your students?

MAJ I never do define it; seems a waste of time when you could be writing. They're all so different; you read Donald Barthelme or Flannery O'Connor or Julio Cortázar, and they're different from, say, Raymond Carver, or John Cheever or Lorrie Moore. To me, it's whatever works. I also say there are no rules. I often hear students spouting rules they learned in some previous workshop or class, and I say, where did you get that rule? I never agreed to that rule. A story can be anything, it can be a numbered list, it's whatever works for that person or story. I don't waste time thinking even of genre – my piece on Trogir blends fiction and non-fiction. Just write and see what works.

JB Does it get on your nerves when people provide or insist on firm definitions?

MAJ Yes. I'm sometimes suspicious. I see people who can talk the talk, but it doesn't mean they can write a story. I think influences are more important than rules. It's good to have guidelines. You take Joyce, he probably learned how to write a traditional short story and started fooling around more and more, and I think that's what you should be doing. But he had the background. You have to read!

I see some students whose influence is completely TV or film and that can work, but it's still useful to have a little more of a literary background. As Cormac McCarthy said, "Books come out of books."

When I young I was reading tough urban writers like Bukowski or Selby, but then I hit Flannery O'Connor on the farm and John Cheever in the suburbs, and I really liked both. A mix is useful.

JB I recently read a short essay by Nadine Gordimer on the short story. There she writes, "like a child suffering from healthy neglect, the short story survives." Only later did I see that the essay was published in 1968. My question: are the constant worries about the health of the short story form legitimate? What's your take?

MAJ I think it's all relative. Fitzgerald and Hemingway could make a really good living, they could make 20,000 bucks writing stories for the glossy mags (that's probably about 100,000 or more today), so that's a tangible decline. Alice Munro published her early story "Boy and Girls" in *The Montrealer*. That mag and other things like it in newspapers are gone.

But because of writing workshops, there's been an explosion in stories – a story is much easier to workshop than a novel or than a non-fiction travel book or a longer project.



I don't think there's any shortage in numbers, perhaps the opposite, but the market has clearly changed. In Canada, editors and agents want a novel or a longer book of non-fiction rather than a short story collection (even if they're really good) – or they'll do a two-book deal and say, "OK, we'll do your collection of short stories if you also do a novel."

In '68, when Gordimer was talking about "healthy neglect," mags like *The Atlantic* and *Esquire* and many others were taking stories – good money, good writers. My teacher at Iowa, Bharati Mukherjee, had a story in *Playboy*, and it was very good money. The question was whether you should take that money or not.

Today there are many lit mags and online mags, but they don't offer much money. With books I always try to get as much of an advance as I can. One press said we can give you a smaller advance with higher royalties later, but I prefer to get it up front, money in hand.

In terms of time I put in as a writer, I could make more money as a paperboy! But I'm addicted and I really can't complain. I have my teaching job and the two feed each other. I'm rewarded for publishing and I want to do it, so it's ideal. And if you get books and stories out there, people might see that and come to the University of New Brunswick, which is good for the school. Craig Davidson, for example, who also writes Stephen King style books under the name Nick Cutter, attended UNB, and later some of his fans applied, so there can be a ripple effect.

JB Back to genre: do you see a difference between linked short stories and novels?

MAJ It can be confusing. One review of my last book, *Knife Party at the Hotel Europa*, said that you can count this book of stories as my second novel (after the hockey novel). Originally I did a UNB summer course in Rome, loved it and decided I wanted to write a quick, sunny little Italian novel, but it took a life of its own and became a different creature, as happens in writing. But I couldn't sell it! It was discouraging. I took the same material and worked on it as separate stories, won some prizes, and built the book *Knife Party* out of those stories, one by one. The same material, but it got stronger. Maybe I'm just better at short stories! I tried to write a novel, appeared to fail, revamped it as a collection of stories, which seemed to work, but then it was compared to a novel in the reviews! I don't know what the lesson is there.

Alice Munro has done connected stories – it's almost like a compromise. Publishers try to market it as a novel, even if it isn't. Think of Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*. I read some of those stories individually in mags, but then it's marketed as a novel. It seems obvious to me, though, that they are short stories, and no shame in that. Stories are the best form. I admire Munro for her devotion to the story.



JB You're the fiction editor of *The Fiddlehead*. How does your work as a writer and an editor go together? Also, how tempted are you, as an editor, to make major changes to the stories you publish in *The Fiddlehead*?

MAJ Not so much major changes, but always endings. Endings are tough. I was working with an author for the summer fiction issue and she got mad and said, "You write the damned ending!" So I did. It's very tempting. I can see the potential there, the possibilities; I can see what works, what doesn't work. What to repeat, what to cut. But I lack time.

JB Is the process different with more established writers that *The Fiddlehead* publishes?

MAJ I can't think of a good example; I'll edit with anyone who is willing. There's a mix of new and old, writers we may not know and some we do. I'll ask for work. I took a story from Eden Robinson that the *Walrus* turned down because they'd asked her to tone down the swearing. I read about that in the *Globe and Mail* and right away I e-mailed her and said, "Send it to me!"

The tempting thing is to edit, to try and make it better. A lot of people get to know me as an editor rather than a writer. I'm not sure how it happened, wasn't planned.

Our individual interaction at *The Fiddlehead* may be rare, but I hope not. Years back I had a story in the *Georgia Review* where we did a lot of back and forth, and I said to the editor, "I didn't know magazines still did that!"

At *The Fiddlehead* we do personal notes. For example, I might say, "This setting or dialogue is working really well, but I'm not sure about the ending." Always endings. Sometimes I'll be at a reading, say, on the West Coast, and someone will say, "You wrote me the nicest rejection letter!" That's nice to hear, versus anger.

JB Your work contains plenty of references to music. You've mentioned Joy Division in the past. Can you say how music influences your stories?

MAJ I feel like Joy Division and Hank Williams were as much an influence on me as William Faulkner was, but I can't really articulate why – it's just something you pick up, something like mood, atmosphere, imagery, intent, what a band wants to do. It's hard to explain. There's a singer I like called Gillian Welch, who does Appalachian stuff, but she says punk was an influence on her. You don't really hear it, but she says it's there. Sometimes influence is like an attitude, or an approach to the material, or what material you choose, what you value, what you shun.

Ever since I was a kid song lyrics have been important. I also think that writers envy musicians because there's something immediate and direct. I can work on a book and it might appear years later or not appear, but if you hit an electric guitar and amp (or harp and mic), you've got an immediate effect. That's very appealing.



JB When I teach your stories, students are amazed at the range of references (e. g. in “The Cougar” there’s a nod to Eric Lindros, “I’m going to Disneyland,” but also to William Blake’s “London”). Do you worry about whether readers will “get” the reference or allusion?

MAJ Updike said you hope you have the ideal reader out there. A reviewer once complained about too much professor in me, he disliked references to Othello, to William Blake, but that’s what I want in there, I don’t want to dumb it down.

JB But the references are not all high literature. There’s definitely a mix of high and low...

MAJ I want both. My brain is a little bit of a jukebox; so if I’m working on a theme, it’ll bring up Neil Young, and I’ll drop in a little snippet there, or if I’m writing a travel piece, I will add Blake’s the river in London being walled off by the authorities. My brain supplies these and I’d rather use them than to fret, Oh, nobody’s going to get these. Why fret? I hope they’re going to get them and enjoy, or they’ll just keep reading.

JB When you were talking to students in Ljubljana, one student praised your taste in video games, yet you said you’d never played it.

MAJ I got that from my son Martin, who will talk your ear off. He was talking about Dwarf Fortress, and I thought, I’ll write some of that down, I can use it in my story set on the moon.¹

JB Do you ever tell your students “Write what you know?” or is that a writer’s cliché?

MAJ It is a cliché. Write what you know if that is good, but also write what you don’t know. My story “My White Planet” has a radar station up north and I’ve never been up there! I made it up. So it’s not one or the other. You can do both.

Students say, “My teacher told me only to write what I know...” I can see how that comes up. You have to take on something you can sell as a story, that convinces a reader, is plausible. If you’re 17 and writing about a lawyer, you don’t have to make him the number one attorney in New York. It can be a law firm in Saint John. If you do make it in New York, you don’t have to make the character the number one attorney! You need the right details.

When growing up, I thought you had to write about cocktail parties in New York, and when I read Robert Kroetsch’s *The Studhorse Man*, set in Edmonton, it was a revelation. I thought, “I didn’t know you could do this!”

So I can see where those guidelines come from. But they are just guidelines, not a jail. Read for inspiration and be flexible and have fun; writing should be fun.

1) “The December Astronauts (or Moonbase Horse Code)” is available at: <http://numerocinqmagazine.com/2010/06/15/the-december-astronauts-or-moonbase-horse-code-a-story-by-mark-anthony-jarman/>