

Myles McDonough

Introduction: Bret Anthony Johnston

The University of Tennessee "Writers in the Library" Reading Series

November 7, 2016

When I first got the email from the Harvard English Department, telling me that Bret Anthony Johnston would be my senior thesis advisor, I was on the toilet. Mind you, I wasn't using it – I just needed a place to sit. I'd just come from Krav Maga practice, down in the basement, and this bathroom, quiet and white, happened to be the best place in Pforzheimer House to change out of a set of sweaty clothes. Sore, and grateful for the cool porcelain, I'd sat down to scroll through a few emails and texts while I caught my breath. I hadn't known that the email – the one that would tell me whether or not I got to write fiction my senior year – would be waiting, at the very top of the list of notifications.

I opened that email like an EOD technician diffusing a potential roadside bomb. Then I read it.

I screamed so loudly, and palm-struck the nearest tile wall with such force, that a nice sophomore couple walking by in the hallway paused to make sure one of their peers hadn't been brutally murdered while using the facilities.

If this strikes you as an overreaction, then I can only assume you've never been lucky enough to study the art of fiction writing under Bret Anthony Johnston. I could go on about his achievements as an artist and a writer – and, I assure you, I will – but I decided early on, in the process of writing this introduction, that I would be remiss if I didn't speak to Bret's outstanding qualities as a teacher and mentor – if only because I, and more than a few other young writers working today, owe what we've got directly to him, for reasons I hope to make clear.

In Bret's introduction to *Naming the World*, a collection of writing exercises solicited from dozens of skilled writers and edited by Bret himself, he writes: "I don't believe in talent.

Nor do I put faith in the idea of inspiration, the muse, or the muse's shadowy and malicious twin, writer's block" (*Naming the World* xv). In that same introduction, he describes the writing exercises within the book not as dictates handed down from the divine Published Authors on High, but as "an invitation to peek behind a magician's curtain, to rifle through a carpenter's toolbox" (xix). Fiction writing, in other words, is not the privilege of a select few literary heroes, endowed at birth with a knack for composition which the rest of us dull mortals are lucky enough to consume in slack-jawed, dumbfounded awe. Quite the opposite. Much like carpentry – or indeed, magic – writing is a *craft*, in the most literal sense of the word. It is art, as in artifice – a skill to be acquired through a lifetime of practice. No one is *inherently* barred from entry for lack of so-called "talent." To put it another way – there is no excuse. As Bret himself writes: "I'm not at all sure that writing can be taught. I am positive, though, that it can be learned" (xv).

And learn we did. Twelve of us, in a small, red-ish conference room on the ground floor of the Barker Center. We'd come here from the College and from the graduate schools – from the English department and many others besides, not all of them part of the humanities. We had all applied for a seat at this table – some of us, rejected the first time, had to apply more than once. So we had made it through a rigorous selection process to get to this point. Our submission packets had been moved from the towering 'Maybe' pile to the stunted 'Yes' pile. And yet, if I may speak for those who are absent, many of us felt as though there'd been some mistake. That we didn't *really* belong here, in our first undergraduate fiction writing workshop – that we'd managed to pass as members of the elect till now, but that we'd soon be found out. That the *real* writers, sniffing out our appreciation for television, would give us the bum's rush, toss us out on our lying asses in the frigid New England "spring." We knew, each and every one of us, that our writing careers were over.

Then Bret came in, in his best flannel shirt, and set the record straight.

From the start, Bret treated us as *apprentices* – apprentices to that craft at which he has proven himself a master. He freed us from our own egos – freed us up *to write* – by opening up that writer's toolbox, by focusing our novice attention not on high-minded concepts like "theme" but on the nitty-gritty practicalities of the writer's life, the tips and tools of the trade which he illustrated with unambiguous, concrete examples – some of which I was lucky enough to find in my first-ever workshop notebook while putting together this introduction.

In my notes on a February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013 discussion of plot, in which we touched upon the importance of giving our protagonist a *tangible* desire in order to drive the narrative forward, I have written down a bullet point which reads: "He [the protagonist] wants a donut, not world peace." From later that same day, on the role that pressure or stress plays revealing character: "Stick a character in a tree, throw progressively bigger rocks at him. See what he does." On March 6<sup>th</sup>: "Judging characters [equals sign] kiss of death. Luke – boring. Mr. Right. Vader – boring. Mr. Wrong. Han Solo – *interesting*. Could do either."

What Bret Anthony Johnston taught us was not merely awareness of but *love* of craft – excited attention to the details of the writing process itself, rather than just the product – devotion to the work, in the original sense of both words. It's a love which is evident in his own fiction, and in particular in his debut novel, *Remember Me Like This*. There are no Luke Skywalkers or Darth Vaders in this story – given the circumstances they face, the members of the Campbell family can hardly help but be interesting.

Justin, the elder of the two Campbell brothers, is returned to his family at the age of fifteen, four years after walking out of their house and vanishing from their lives. Parents Eric and Laura Campbell, along with younger brother Griff and grandfather Cecil, learn that not only

was Justin kidnapped, but that his kidnapper, one Dwight Buford, had kept him in the town of Corpus Christi, TX, not far from the Campbell family home in Southport – all this time, their lost son had been within driving distance. Their happy reunion is short-lived, however, as the unspoken weight of young Justin's trauma begins to crush the family in the weeks and months following his return.

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of the novel is Bret's decision to situate that trauma largely in the background of the narrative, rather than at the forefront as one would expect of a more typical thriller. The actual facts of Justin's hellish experience are mentioned only in passing, or else break through the surface in those rare moments when they cannot be contained. The effect is remarkable – we, the reader, feel as oppressed by this silence as do the members of the Campbell family – like them, we are to unable to break it. This profound choice is dictated not only by taste, but – as I suspect all of Bret's literary decisions are – his love of craft. As he himself put it in a recent interview with literary journal *Chapter 16*: "I feel complete responsibility to my characters [...] I want to know where the characters are vulnerable, absolutely I do, but I don't want to exploit those vulnerabilities. I want to earn the characters' trust so that they will reveal themselves to me more fully. My goal is to get to the point where the characters quicken to life and become animated on the page." That we feel this quickening in the members of the Campbell family is a testament, I believe, not only to Bret's skill as a writer, but to his integrity as a craftsman.

Integrity, or honesty, is Bret's indelible mark. In workshop, he never minced words. Not about craft, and not about the nature his vocation. On February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Bret shared some of the realities of the writer's life with the workshop. From that day – my very first class in fiction writing, ever – I have a footnote which reads: "Lonely, hard, sad."

But just below that is another, which reads: "Choosing, not chosen." Bret explained to us, in other words, that there are no predestined writers, only people who choose to sit down and write. That the sitting was a prerequisite to the writing, and that any of us could sit.

In *Naming the World*, Bret claims that writing is "a calling, an act of courage, an act of faith. Much of the writer's work must be – can only be – accomplished by doggedly venturing into territories unknown, by risking failure with every word. With this in mind, I strive in my classes [...] to create an environment in which each writer feels invited and prepared to take such risks" (xv-xvii).

Well, Bret – speaking from the student's perspective, I can tell you that you pulled it off. Your workshop is where we flocked to risk it all on the page, knowing that, at the end of a hard day's constructive criticism, you would pick us up, brush us off, and send us on our way, better writers than we had been an hour ago. It's where more than a few of us realized that this craft – this thing that we love – is a call worth answering. Without that workshop, and without your support, I for one wouldn't be here today.

So thank you, Bret. You're an incredible writer and an extraordinary mentor, and you deserve more praise than I have time to give here. But we can make up part of the difference, anyway, if you would all be kind enough to help me in welcoming Bret Anthony Johnston to the stage.