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An interview with Dan Chaon

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- 1 Dan Chaon has published three collections of short stories (*Fitting Ends*, *Among the Missing*, *Stay Awake*) and two novels (*You Remind Me of Me*, *Await Your Reply*). *Among the Missing* was a finalist for the National Book Award and Dan Chaon was the recipient of the 2006 Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio and teaches Creative Writing at Oberlin College. His two novels and one collection of short stories have been translated into French: *Parmi les Disparus* (*Among the Missing*), *Le Livre de Jonas* (*You Remind Me of Me*) and *Cette Vie ou une Autre* (*Await Your Reply*).
- 2 In one of his short stories, “Safety Man,” a woman uses an inflatable man, a Safety Man (“The perfect ladies’ companion for urban living!” or more precisely a « visual deterrent »), as her main moral support to cope with her grief and bereavement, after the sudden death of her husband. If this unexpected gift from her mother was first perceived as a joke while her husband was still alive, now that she is alone with her two young daughters, “Safety Man has begun to seem entirely necessary.” This dramatic situation encapsulates the main themes and even essential features of the fictional “mood” of Dan Chaon’s fiction: bereavement, ubiquitous and protean threats, the thin line between sanity and insanity, but also how we find balance or solace in the most unlikely places and the difficult communication between parents and children, more generally. The latter theme gives way to one of Chaon’s most moving stories, “Prodigal,” and more particularly to these incandescent lines: “But no matter how hard we try, we are disappearing. Oh, my child, you will never save me. You will never be what I wanted to be, you will never love me in the way I need you to, you will never give me myself back. And yet, I forgive you. You won’t know this until a long time later, my little narrator, my wide-eyed camera. You won’t know it, but I forgave you a long time ago.” But in Chaon’s work, all parents are not always so understanding, and can turn into potentially lethal threats for their children as in “The Bees,” a particularly disturbing story. Indeed, Chaon’s latest collection of short stories taps into the horror genre but without using any explicit imagery, thus leaving room for the reader’s imagination. And in the brilliant *Await Your Reply*, the obvious reference to crime fiction (identity theft, cybercrime, missing people...) is used to create an underlying tension,

but the author never resorts to traditional genre plot, only keeping its dynamics while dropping the more conventional aspects of genre fiction. Chekhov is often quoted as saying that you cannot put a loaded gun onstage in Act I unless someone is going to fire it in Act III. Yet, in Dan Chaon's fiction, no one fires the gun so to speak, but it is still there for the reader to see.

- 3 This interview was conducted by email in December 2012 and is divided into 5 themes.

Form

AS- The recent publication of *Stay Awake* shows that, contrary to other writers who never go back to short fiction once they get their first novel published, you still consider short stories as a worthy form of artistic expression. What can short fiction do that novels can't and vice-versa?

DC- The best way I can describe my understanding of the difference is to compare a short story to a photograph, and a novel to a film. Both can be wonderful experiences, but extremely different for both the artist and the audience. For me, a short story encapsulates a moment, a deeply suggestive and mysterious moment, which the audience must regard, consider, interpret, in the same way they experience a photo. The audience can never know what lies beyond the borders of the photo. It is a single, floating snapshot of a specific event. Meanwhile, the novel, like a film, is the record of a series of events—a narrative that must engage more fully in cause and effect, and must spend more time building a believable sense of a world.

The thing I love about short stories is that they can create a gesture that communicates to us without logic or explanation. Stories are not only kin to the photograph, but also to the song, and to a dance. For a moment you are immersed in a world, and then it vanishes.

AS- Does it mean that, when it comes to the novel, the same moment can only be achieved through a different strategy or not achieved at all (although you can also leave things unexplained in a novel)?

DC- Honestly, I think it has to do with length. A neurologist might be able to explain it scientifically, but there's a different effect that you can get from a shorter work, something you can "hold in your mind" and experience in a single brief sitting. So we might say that the experience of "the moment" and "the shudder of the unknowable" is more acute and exquisite in these shorter works. You could say the same is true, for example, with the difference between a single aria or song and an entire opera.

AS- In both your novels, *You Remind Me of Me* and *Await Your Reply*, you have several story lines eventually meet at the end. Is it part of a plotting strategy you feel particularly at ease with?

DC- I have tended to patch novels together like a quilt made up of a series of short stories. The "strategy" is more of a necessity for me, since I think in a more fragmentary way than traditional novels require.

AS- So you write novels essentially as assembled short stories? But am I right to say that *You Remind Me of Me* seems less "fragmentary" than *Await Your Reply*?

DC- I think I write novels as assembled *pieces*, without thinking of chapters necessarily as "stand-alone" short stories.

Await Your Reply is deliberately more fragmentary—and I think was influenced not only by writers like Kate Atkinson and filmmakers like Alejandro González Iñárritu, but also by contemporary American serial television like *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, which juggled a number of narrative threads in a way that inspired me.

I was also interested in the effects that were achieved by deliberately fragmented novels like Julio Cortázar’s “Hopscotch” and Marguerite Yourcenar’s “A Coin in Nine Hands”—both of which were very big inspirations for me.

AS- Does plot matter? In other words, because both your novels can be said to present well-plotted narratives, is plot something you spend a decent amount of time “mulling over” before the actual writing process?

DC- As a reader, I like plots. I enjoy twists and turns and surprises. As a writer, I find that I don’t always consider these elements when I’m exploring a situation. Usually, I try to write without a specific goal in mind, and let the characters take me where they will; once I have a first draft, I will do more “mulling over” and shaping of the narrative, so in many ways “plot” is something that emerges afterwards.

AS- So do you rearrange (or reorganize) the narrative after the first draft?

DC- Yes. The process of reshaping and reorganizing a first draft is, to me, the most important and satisfying part of the creative process.

AS- One of the stories in *Among the Missing*, “Falling backwards,” is narrated backwards, in reverse chronological order. Why did you choose this particular narrative option?

DC- That particular story came to me as fragments, and I tried various ways of arranging them. But I found the character’s story most moving when I began to picture her growing younger. For me there has always been something particularly poignant about coming across an image of an adult you know as a child. It has a kind of shock—I think, for example, of the first time I saw a photograph of my father when he was a little boy. It took my breath away—this sudden, intense awareness of Time, and understanding, for the first time, how it actually passes.

Location

AS- Your novels display both a strong sense of place and of “nowhereness.” Is it something you consciously try to achieve?

DC- I honestly don’t feel comfortable claiming that anything I write is conscious, because the unconscious is such an active participant in my work. The right brain—the part that deals in images, the part that has no language—is often the main author of my work.

In general, though, place is an important aspect of my thought process, and yet I am attracted to places that give off a sense of “nowhereness.”

AS- The setting of your work is mostly non-urban. Why?

DC- I’m not sure this is true. I feel like it’s more like 60% non-urban. Quite a few of my stories take place in cities. And both of the novels have scenes that take place in urban areas.

But, OK, 60% is still a majority. I think my attachment to non-urban areas is both practical—since that is the kind of area I grew up in—and also a part of my

imagination, because I prefer my characters to be isolated from the centers of traditional mainstream culture.

AS- Does the term Middle America adequately describe the setting of your work?

DC- It does for some people. People who actually live in “Middle America” would make big distinctions between Nebraska and Ohio, between Chicago and Cleveland, between small town Iowa and Council Bluffs, Iowa. But to people in New York or London or Paris, those distinctions might not seem particularly significant. In some ways, saying “Middle America” is like saying “Europe,” as if there isn’t any difference between being French or German or Spanish.

That said, I think some of the attitudes and behaviors that I am writing about might fit very well in any number of different areas of Middle America, which might not be as common on the East or West Coast.

Am I a writer who has a particular interest in the “Middle American Experience?”
Yes.

AS- Sorry, I realize that my two previous questions seemed patronizing toward “non-major urban areas” (I only meant this as opposed to major metropolitan areas but you are right, these are not the only cities in the USA) and Middle America. So let me rephrase my question: Is the “Middle American Experience” part of your personal background or is it something that has surfaced in your fiction unexpectedly?

DC- I’ve spent most of my life in Middle America. I grew up in Nebraska, went to college in Chicago, and have lived in Cleveland for the past 23 years. So these places appear frequently in my fiction because they are the places I know best.

I’ve done more travelling in the past ten years than I ever did, so the newer work (*Await Your Reply* and *Stay Awake*) have a greater diversity of settings—though both are still deeply grounded in the Midwest.

AS- Would you say that your characters reflect their environment or is the psyche of your characters projected onto their environment?

DC- Both. I think the two are so tangled up that we can never separate them. For all of us.

Genre & Themes

AS- *Await Your Reply* and *Stay Awake* seem to a certain extent to use genre fiction as a background: crime fiction for the former, horror fiction for the latter. When you set about writing this novel and these short stories, was it your intention to play or tamper with the rules of genre fiction?

DC- Yes.

And for several reasons.

First, I have had a long love affair with “genre fiction,” and it was an early influence when I was a child.

And second, I grew uncomfortable with the Anglophone literary establishment, which I felt had become very narrow and doctrinaire. I wanted to play with the fun toys that the disreputable kids got to play with.

And third: I've never been quite as interested in plot and structure as most "genre" writers are, and I had to "tamper with the rules" because I wasn't capable of following those rules. I found more "literary" solutions to the problems because that was the only way my mind would work.

AS- The stories in *Stay Awake* contain multiple references to horror and gothic fiction (two-headed babies, ghosts, threatening parents...)? Would you count genre fiction among your literary influences?

DC- Absolutely. The earliest writers I loved were all considered "genre writers": Ray Bradbury. Shirley Jackson. H.P. Lovecraft. J.R.R. Tolkien. Stephen King. Peter Straub.

But then, when we use the term "genre" we're not talking about Italo Calvino, or Vladimir Nabokov or Donald Barthelme. All of whom you could say at some level are genre writers. I think what we often mean by "genre," at some level, is hack writing, the kind of stuff that is churned out just to supply grist for a marketing niche—anything that is tied to a formula, rather than writing that wants to make a claim to be art, or to discover something about the world.

But, at the same time, I think *all* the formulas for fiction—whether you're talking about SF or Romance or Western or Horror or whatever—all these sometimes formulaic genres have also produced great works of fiction. It just depends on how the individual writers have responded and adapted and made use of those forms. There are people like the Bronte sisters, for example, who were responding to the gothic form in an interesting way. So I don't really think that the term "genre fiction" is an easily applied term. I think there are plenty of really good writers who are stuck in that ghetto with that "genre" label, and that "genre" is used to unfairly dismiss them.

AS- Do you still read genre fiction? And when you say that "there are plenty of really good writers who are stuck in that ghetto," do you have specific names in mind?

DC- Yes, I still read genre fiction frequently. Among contemporary writers I've admired are John Crowley, Philip Pullman (particularly the *His Dark Materials* trilogy), Elizabeth Hand, Neil Gaiman, Rick Yancy... it would be quite a long list, actually.

AS- Would you agree that bereavement and dislocated lives (your short stories often depict the moment when your characters realize that their lives are going nowhere) are two of your most recurring themes?

DC- I am sad to say yes. This is a theme that I wish I could avoid, but it keeps reappearing.

AS- Throughout your work, you have written about the troubled ("Prodigal," *You Remind Me of Me...*) or even violent ("The Bees") relationship between children and parents. Is this theme particularly important to you?

DC- Yes.

AS- Is it something you don't want to explain or can't explain?

DC- It would require me to go into autobiographical detail, and I'd rather not. This, I guess, is my "Midwestern-ness" showing—a reluctance to discuss one's private life.

AS- Do you want your readers to experience discomfort when reading your work?

DC- Yes. But that seems sadistic, and that isn't my intention. But I can't think of a better term than "discomfort."

To me, the word “comfort” connotes a sense of satisfaction and peace, maybe a little tinge of complacency. There is a mother-figure or a nurse saying, “Don’t worry,” and “It will all be okay,” and “Go to sleep. Don’t think.”

And if you were to say that my stories were the opposite of comfort—I wouldn’t protest. I like that line of Kafka’s: “I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we’re reading doesn’t wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for?”

AS- Is creating discomfort a difficult creative process? How and/or when do you know that you have achieved this particular effect?

DC- I don’t really know. It seems to come naturally to me, even when I don’t want it to. For example, I wrote the story “Long Delayed, Always Expected” [in *Stay Awake*] as an attempt to do something light and comedic. But it turned out that the story made a lot of readers extremely uncomfortable. I “achieved” the effect without even trying, which doesn’t seem so much an “achievement” as it does a character flaw that I need to address.

American literature

AS- Do you feel that a particular literary heritage has been passed on to you?

DC- I do.

I admit that the American literary canon has made a deep impression on me. I am a child of Hawthorne and Poe and James; of Lovecraft and Sherwood Anderson; of Shirley Jackson and John Cheever and Vladimir Nabokov and James Baldwin; of Joyce Carol Oates and John Edgar Wideman and Raymond Carver. I can’t name all of them, but I do feel strongly that I am trying to engage in some way with those people—and of course many others.

There are many of my contemporaries whose work I admire—Chris Ware, Jennifer Egan, Kelly Link, George Saunders, Mary Gaitskill, Victor LaValle, Junot Diaz, Lynda Barry—whose work I feel a kinship with, who I feel like they are brothers and sisters, but I don’t know whether they would feel the same way.

What is it? I think that, despite the differences in style and substance, there is a particularly American expression of suffering that I understand and feel connected to.

AS- It is interesting that you mention Jennifer Egan because one of her novels, *Look at Me*, seems thematically tightly connected to your own work? Have you read it?

- 4 DC- Yes, absolutely. I greatly admired her last three books: *Look at Me*, *The Keep*, and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

AS- Do you belong to a literary scene or do you feel that you have a specific place in the current American literary landscape?

DC- I feel like I’m engaged with a stream of American literature, but not a main stream.

AS- Is this landscape shifting?

DC- I expect it is; everything is always shifting.

AS- But is it shifting in a way that has any impact on your creative process? For instance, when you read other contemporary writers, do you feel that they have a direct influence on your work?

DC- I'm absolutely influenced by my contemporaries—by individual writers. At the same time, I read new writers and old writers in about equal measure, so I'm just as likely to be influenced by a dead writer who I haven't read before as I am by a living writer who has put out something new. I don't feel a strong sense of a particular "trend" in American literature right now—certainly nothing as influential as "minimalism" and "dirty realism" were in the 80's and early 90's.

AS- Does the term "post-postmodern era" mean anything to you? Has postmodernism had a strong impact on the forms of fiction?

DC- These terms don't mean much to me. You would have to name specific artists.

AS- I was thinking of John Barth, William Gaddis, some "experimental" novels by Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster, Kurt Vonnegut or even Don DeLillo.

DC- I don't personally feel much kinship with those writers, who all seem to me to be more interested in satire and contemporary social critique than I am.

AS- You have received or been nominated for various awards and your books often appear on top-ten lists. How does this recognition influence your career and the way you write?

DC- I am always happy to get recognition, and I appreciate it, and it can be very flattering. But it never helps the "Writer" part of you. It seems to me that every book is like starting again, which is both a blessing and a curse.

AS- What about the financial impact of these awards or nominations? Do they allow you to be more independent financially and devote more time to writing?

DC- I have earned more money than I expected to from my writing, but I don't plan to quit my "day job" as a teacher. I don't trust that there will continue to be a steady enough income, and I don't want to rely on my art to earn a living. I feel I have more freedom to write whatever I like if I'm not worrying about how many copies I will sell, or what awards I will win.

AS- According to you, why does American literature continue to appeal to a wide international readership?

DC- I'm not sure I understand this question.

AS- Well, for instance, in France and I think this is true for a majority of European countries, American authors are widely translated and read, much more than, say, Chinese or (contemporary) Russian authors. Some French critics claim that American writers are more popular than French authors, because the former still focus on "storytelling."

DC- Hmm. If you're saying that American writers are more committed to storytelling than French writers, I'm not sure that's true, and I don't know enough about contemporary French writers to make a sound argument.

What *may* be true is that the American writers who are translated and who develop a large international following tend to be "storytellers." But Americans aren't the only ones—think of the enormous popularity of Stieg Larsson, for example.

One of the most popular French writers in America is the mystery writer Fred Vargas. And (whatever you may think of him) Michel Houellebecq was also widely read. And perhaps this is because these writers are both "storytellers."

It seems to me that writers who forget that the novel is, at its core, a narrative medium, do so at the peril of having a limited audience.

Readers

AS- What do you expect from your readers? Can you describe your ideal reader?

DC- I think—I hope this doesn't sound insane—but I sometimes find myself writing for other writers, writers I love, dead writers a lot of the time. When I wrote my first short story I was obsessed with Ray Bradbury and I remember wishing, I don't know, wouldn't it be cool if Ray Bradbury read this!! That's still the kind of person I think of more. I like the idea that I'm in some weird way having conversations with other writers that I really admire. To me, at least part of what you're doing in art is connecting to this larger chain of stuff that you're responding to. Whether it's literature or whether it's film or whatever.

AS- Does the response of your readers have any kind of impact on your writing? How and when do you meet your readers? Are these "encounters" satisfactory to you?

DC- I do readings at colleges and bookstores, and so forth. Honestly, I don't usually expect to meet "my readers," whoever they are. The encounters vary, but they don't effect the writing process.

Of course everybody's dream is to get their work out there in the world and to see somebody on the airplane reading your book, and to have a stranger write to you and say "I read your book!" But in some ways it's a very weird experience and antithetical to the reasons you start writing in the first place: you like being alone a lot and being in your own mind, in your own private world. That's one of the most difficult things for me to negotiate, is to get away from the world of publishing and the world of reviews.

AS- To what extent (if any) do reviews impact your creative process?

DC- I don't find it helpful to think about reviews or reviewers when I sit down to write. Quite the opposite—I have to put them out of my mind if I hope to write anything.

AS- Are you concerned by the supposedly dwindling readership in America?

DC- Isn't everyone concerned?

- 5 But, actually, from my own experience, I don't feel that readers are actually dwindling. Maybe facts bear this phenomenon out, but I don't notice it as a major issue.

AS- You don't agree with Philip Roth that there are only 120,000 "serious readers" left in the USA today (considering the fact that your work certainly requires "serious reading")?

DC- Mr. Roth must have access to some complex research data that I don't have. But I find myself a little repulsed by the snobbery of the term "Serious Reader." I suppose most old men look at the younger generation and imagine them to be "less serious" than they themselves were.

As for me, I can only observe my students, who seem to be quite voracious and serious; and the numbers of people who come to literary festivals and so forth. Of course, these days, serious literature must compete with many other forms of "serious" entertainment.

But I'm not bemoaning my fate. Perhaps my expectations are lower than someone like Roth and other white male writers of his generation, who, I think, had a deeper sense of their prerogative to be at the center of the culture's attention. Those days of a Mt. Olympus of "great writers" have waned, and perhaps that is not a bad thing.

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