



S. CRAIG RENFROE JR

An Interview with Craig Renfroe

THE BACON

TBR: Tennessee?

Yeah, we're staying with the mother-in-law.

TBR: The wife + you + ... ?

Just me and the wife (Heather)

TBR: So no scamper-arounds then.

Nope. Not yet. One day maybe.

TBR: And your wife does:

She works for a children's theater, writes poetry, and works for Starbucks for the insurance and to save us money on coffee.

TBR: Can you shift that employee discount to out-of-state spots?

Yeah. It's a nice benefit.

TBR: Side jobs yourself?

I teach creative writing at Queens University of Charlotte—they make us say it that way so you know it's not in New York.

TBR: For awhile now?

Over ten years now...though it doesn't feel that way.

TBR: *bow* That's a decent stretch. How're current classes?

It's just gotten better. The last few years we started an undergrad creative writing major. So I get to teach the fiction workshops and mentor the fiction writers.

TBR: Big program / is it holding its ground?

It's a small liberal arts college...well it was when I started (less than 1500 students I think)...now we're a comprehensive university with a liberal arts focus... which means it's still small, small classes. Most of mine aren't over 15 students.

TBR: Writing between classes - does it happen?

Yeah, I don't teach over the summer to theoretically write—but I find with more time comes more procrastination. I get more reading and TV watching done at least.

TBR: Reading currently?

The Hunger Games and *Interviews with Francis Bacon*.

TBR: Usually keep a nonfict vs fict going?

Yeah. I try to have something craft-oriented going with some novel.

And I guess like most people I have half-read stuff laying all around but I know I'll finish those two in the next week.

TBR: Are you torching the *Hunger Games*? Seems most are gobbling them like crazy.

I resisted but Heather's reading them and some friends promised they were good. And so far it's pulled me in. She's very good at setup/payoff. And I just got back from a study tour where I took the students to Ireland and the books were spreading through them like a

disease. Those and the *50 Shades of Grey* books.

TBR: What were y'all studying in Ireland?

All the juniors at Queens can go on a study tour at the end of their junior year. The semester they take a course studying the culture of the place they're going and then spend a couple weeks there. So our tour was generally an Irish/celtic study tour.

TBR: Fair deal. Any of it English-focused or is the group more broad-based?

From all majors. There was one creative writing major but a lot of nurses and business types. I still made them read Joyce and Yeats.

TBR: Setup. Back a few steps. 'She's good at setup/payoff'. How do you approach setting up a story/ a scenario / a scene etc.

I have a friend who's more of a genre novelist—though a very literary one and we were recently talking about our "process." He writes long outlines—20+ pages sometimes. I guess I work more

through accruing the work slowly—trusting that even if I write the pay-off first I can set it up in the revision. He would argue I guess that he does that in the outlining stage but I guess I more interested in trying to catch the voice to carry a piece... I see I'm guessing a lot there.

TBR: Tentative world, creation

Good word.

TBR: So, first lines then, if you dive right in

Yeah. The first line I write...especially in shorter pieces is often the first line by the end because it suggests the story. It has some kind of inherent conflict that I try to unpack in writing the story.

TBR: I'm thinking title, a question about title. Before? Or after? is a good go-to.

Titles come either immediately or not at all. In the latter, I end up settling, unhappily. How is it with you?

TBR: First, before, *si*. Unless I'm drawing at the same time. See tendencies though, in writers that sub-

mit where repetitive images will be used. 'The Mockingjay'. Not sure, hard for me to slide what I've written in the title as something within so much as around

Thinking too, now about, similar to conversation, how, with a sentence, you'll draw from it to scribe the next. We start at nothing, or one thing. That first sentence.

You say voice, try to find the voice of the piece, where do you look for it?

Suppose you said catch but question still stands, where can you catch a voice?

For me once the situation suggests itself, the voice originates from the character. That's not helpful, in terms of where to look. I subscribe to letting the subconscious do a lot of the work—one of the reasons I've enjoyed reading the Francis Bacon book, that tension between accident and craft. Also, I sometimes just make penis jokes.

TBR: 'The tension lies in the penis tie'

Exactly.

TBR: And the characters are ____ .. the barista with

his self-cut hair? You, fifteen years ago?

I think fictional characters arise out of grinding up all your experiences with people and filling them out with imagination. One of the best descriptions of how a writer uses the his experience to create a fictional character is in *Will in the World*, the bit about Falstaff. That sounds pretentious so I'll drop in a sex joke in a bit.

Though I know some people certainly see a one-to-one relationship between real people and characters. My wife sees herself in my stories sometimes in ways I would disagree with. But then maybe that's the problem with trusting the subconscious.

TBR: And you, in her poetry?

Oh yeah. But I'm right because it's poetry.

TBR: *chuckle*. Insert sex joke

Vagina—equal time.

TBR: I want to know this FB fella. Painter, yeah?

Yeah, painter. Irish. Though lived in London I

think.

TBR: Importance, subjectively?

Oh. I'm sadly schooled in art but he's a fairly well regarded contemporary artist. I think. He was a return to portrait after abstract expressionism, which he rejected. But he also rejected pure illustration. Anyway he's done some fine screaming popes.

TBR: Cthulhu! I read my first Lovecraft ever..um I was in France, ten months ago? Ish. Yeah, and.. awesome. Do you drop into the speculative fiction / horror area at all?

Yeah, I was a teenaged Lovecraft fan and those early influences just become part of your DNA. One of my proudest recent writer moments was getting a horror story in the magazine *Cemetery Dance*--and it had one of those monster pulp mag covers. I'm glad you liked Lovecraft so recent...I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to do it anymore. The sentence-level style stuff.

TBR: Thick and gloupy? antiquation?

All. He never met an adverb or adjective he didn't love.

TBR: Yeah, not exactly high octane

True. I sometimes teach "The Colour Out of Space"—so slow. And I'm surprised that some students still connect.

TBR: So. And this is more for me than *Bacon*, question. My favorite thing about c. writing classes were exercises, the ones that only last for the brief span of class-intro. Do you have any favorites?

I have a couple. But the one that gets a response usually is a two parter:

1. Describe a person you hate.
2. Pretend you are that person and now describe yourself from that person's POV.

My goal, however effective, is to have them think about conflict...so often lacking...and to think about empathy.

TBR: Run three more ;) then back to drawing

circles. One bare-bones, we'll start there: publishing your work, getting it out, giving it out. what are your thoughts on it, how do you approach it?

Well I start by not sharing until I'm ready—I think the importance of any art is that concept of apprenticeship and internalizing a critic that can take you so far by yourself. Then I share it with a few friends. My wife is a trusted critic. She's able to call me out when I try to get away with sloppy (sloppier?) work. Then I send it out. I like to keep several pieces out. More in the past, but now I'm working on a novel seriously (funnily?) and trying to pull back on the short fiction.

TBR: You've got your title laid out for that one?

Yeah. But I don't want to share...afraid it will kill my enthusiasm...

TBR: Good. Okay. 2. (born out of *Sledgehammer* – Peter Gabriel, which just came through the download vine). Your body unceremoniously floats to the surface of a river, an eddy, snags on some rocks, called in to authorities, not friendly ones, who go digging into your pockets.

Your identification card isn't real, but they think it is. your name?

PG...Andy Bellum...

TBR: Andy Bellum, acknowledged spy, according to the papers in the secret compartment at the base of your shoe. His cover. Your cover, while spying on these self-same non-friendly authorities was:

Bonsai gardener...killer bonsai gardener...

TBR: And thankfully (caps) or maybe not, the one thing they didn't find, wedged too deeply in your (sexual joke) is a note and on that note is the first and last sentence which gets passed to your mother-in-law in TN. That sentence reads:

Three penises (penses?) walk into a bar and ask for Bacon.