



TIMOTHY VINCENT

Interview with Timothy Vincent

THE BACON REVIEW

EW: What part of China are you in?

Now we're in Nanjing. Nanjing is about three hours driving from Shanghai. Actually my wife is from Shanghai –she is Shanghainese. We lived on Hong Jiao for awhile, we've lived a couple different places in China. I've been over there for 9 years.

JH: Wow. So do you consider yourself an ex-pat or a migrant.

I came through the customs and I was handing my visa to the Chicago authorities there and I had listed US Resident and he looked at my visa and he said no no you're a Chinese resident. This was in my 5th year and it was so strange. I always just think of myself as visiting China but then its 9 years and I guess–

EW: You've changed over.

We're trying to get back over.

EW: How much time per year are you spending in China at the moment?

It's a four year degree, we [New York University] do the same thing you do in the States – two full semesters. Usually we'll start late August / first of September and then we'll go tip about June. A lot of people come back to the States then.

China has a great Spring Festival break in the middle. You get this long –almost two month– break from about the end of December til February/March, so you get a lot of traveling time there too.

EW: What's the celebration?

Spring Festival. That's their Christmas. It's the Big One. They do a lot of parties, the family-getting-back-together. It's just like their Christmas in many ways except there's no real Christmas theme to it.

EW: The Chinese New Year, that thing is like a mystical thing to me with all the little gifts and red envelopes..

That's the Spring Festival

EW: That's part of it?

Yeah, it's a three to four week celebration.

It's very cool actually. if you were to go, if you have some time go to China during the Spring Festival because it's wall to wall lights and festival fire works—fireworks like you never see here. On the street, in the house.

JH: Fireworks in the house?

Sometimes it feels like that.

(We all laugh.)

You'll be up at 4am and the neighbor will have decided that 4 in the morning is going to make him a fortune so he's lighting fireworks. But you're not at school or work so 4 in the morning's not so rushed.

EW: Now, you are teaching... literature? Economics?

I was English Chair and then I was Assistant Dean for awhile, so i taught almost all of the English program.

We rotate the classes and so forth. I did a little Literature; I did the core curriculum; I did a lot of Composition— 1st year 2nd year; did Business Writing; did Technical Writing and even got to teach a little philosophy because I have cognition in Philosophy. That's how I got into the Chinese thing— because I studied Chinese Philosophy for awhile.

JH: So do you teach Chinese Philosophy or.. ?

I do, and you know at first you walk in and they're like [the students], *Alright, so you're going to tell me about Chuang Tzu and Confucius* and then you find out they don't really study it there. Kind of like us with Aristotle and Socrates. You might get it in college but you don't learn a lot about it 'til that time. It's pretty cool. You have to throw a little Chinese at them to make them think *Oh ok, maybe he knows something*.

(Some chuckles at the expense of the students)

EW: Favorite Chinese philosopher.

Chuang Tzu. Without a doubt. Chuang Tzu. He's the guy that did the butterfly dream, if you remember that one: Am I dreaming of a butterfly or is the butter-

fly dreaming me.

(Neither of us show signs of knowing what he's talking about.)

You guys should get it. it's cool. He's a smart ass. Not like Confucius with a lot of rules; he's the guy who's pulling apart a lot of things. Very paradoxical.

EW: Versus... you say Confucius has a ton of rules?

I like Confucius, I don't want to be unfair here. A little more structure. He has a way of life, he's a little more— you're going to get me talking like a professor here. You don't want me doing that.

JH: No, we love that.

EW: We're out of school so we need all the education we can get.

Chuang Tzu is a Big Guy. He's the guy that won the battle. They're all trying to explore: *How do we live the Dao*. You see it Dao or Tao sometimes and that's just the Way or the Way of Life— how do you get the kind of life that means something to you.

They each had a different approach. They're very similar in some ways, so they feed into one another. Their argument style is much different than the West. They work with each other even when they have different opinions.

But Chuang Tzu had a way called a *ren dao* which is where you see this hierarchy of the 'baba', the Main Guy and then the first son. You saw it way up in the government— the emperor was the father of the country and he gave a lot of great practical and deep ways of coming to a full life.

Lao Tsu and Chuang Tzu were taoist. they had a very different way of looking at things than Confucius. They teased— I should say, Chuang Tzu definitely teased Confucius.

I would say go get a copy , get a Burton Watson translation; it's really amazing. It'll really help you with your writing and everything else.

EW: I went through the *Tao Te Ching* —I used to have a copy that i would return to, and I'd say the initial 3 or 4 run-throughs were so... it was headier than any poetry you get state-side.

Yeah that's Lao Tsu. He's deep. That's deep waters

there.

EW: It's awesome to come away from that feeling almost calmer or a little more settled in your feet.

So when you say 'it affects your writing', your *Prince of Blue Castles* is just— as far as care with each step— the main character is this dude who feels as though his feet are the size of a pin, you know? He slowly picks his way across this awesome story.

How has Chinese teaching, Chinese study in general affected your own narrative?

My first year in China, I remember reading some things I had not read before that I told myself I would read someday, like *War and Peace*. I finally finished *War and Peace*, and some Hemingway that I had not read— things you're supposed to read that you say, *Yeah, I'll read and talk about at the party someday*— and I finally got a chance to read there because there was not a lot of social activity to... like what you might be able to do here [in the States] or what I might be able to do here [Kentucky] when visiting family.

It's all gonna be in Chinese, or most of it. It's not like India where the second language is everywhere. You probably have five or six different people in your

group and they're all over there in China for various reasons. Most of us go over there to get away from things and there's something that I read in Hemingway that I thought was pretty true, at least after my first six months in China: I could write about things in China from home that I couldn't write about when I was in China. It was an orienting dislocation, or an orientation that dislocates you. Things that had not been accessible or clear or easy to pick up became that way for me in China. You've got a lot of down time, there's no TV really for you to watch, at least not as teachers.

Now, there's business people who go over there who it's probably like going from their job in Chicago to another job in Chicago, but we're sitting there in small apartments with sometimes no TV or TV that has 3 Chinese channels.

You quickly learn to either find something to do with yourself or hit the streets, which is another great thing about China: you do get immersed in this land of difference. It is different from the experience that I had growing up— in a lot of good ways and some ways that were challenging too.

JH: Do you find yourself writing about China or the US more?

It took until about my fifth year before I started to write Chinese stories. Set in China. I kept a journal and I wrote a lot about my experiences and about China, but it was just me, an American in China, looking at Chinese people/Chinese experience through my eyes. I wasn't writing any stories.

A story for me has to be realistic. It has to have something people can relate to and I just didn't feel like I had enough experience to talk about these people or even ex-pats in the country until about two years ago and then I did do a couple short stories.

JH: I thought that reading your short story reminded me of a Great Gatsbian world a little bit. I think that the rich ladies reminded me of Gatsby, or the way that society looks at them from an outside perspective almost.

It's certainly not a lifestyle that I'm living, so yeah it would have to be from the Gatsby, and I like the book –I'm going to be teaching that in school this year. We're going to look at the American Dream in my Social English class.

I don't know who did the write up on the magazine but you guys both picked up on what I was hoping

would work in the story. It's not about the gangster thing, even though that's the thrill that I'm hoping people want to read, because it's not really a short short story and I do appreciate you publishing that. I'm sure it's a touch long. But yeah, I wanted to look at some of the psychological aspects of the character, what they do and how they live their lives. If there's a lot of denial or warmth going on there.

EW: And you're uncovering a lot of interesting neuroses and applying them too.. obviously your Asian fellow in the bathroom with the really really stark red all over the napkins in this clean, well-bordered world—almost the most brutal image because everything else is these little blue castles and neat lines. Do you find the release in writing that he finds in blue castles?

Two scenes came from real life in that story or at least two images, two metaphors. One was the bathroom. I walked into a Chinese bathroom in a beautiful mall. It was pristine and clean— and there was a fellow who had had a bloody nose and it was just so different than what I was expecti— I mean, I don't know what you expect walking into a bathroom but you don't expect that kind of image. It was shocking to me.

The other one was the fellow— the Prince of the blue castles, the main character. I saw a guy in Starbucks. You do this a lot in China (and I was reading some of your other interviews and one of your other writers was talking about this too) —you kind of just, I think writers are naturally psychologistic, or are natural psychologists— we don't know the terms but we pick up on people, pick up on instincts and ideas where others might not. But I saw this fellow in Starbucks and he was just like the fellow that I wrote: dressed to the nines with a little red flower in his lapel. Very neat. I don't know who he was, I only saw him for maybe two minutes. He was just very different, very distinct, and you've got to imagine I'm in a Chinese Starbucks and ninety percent of the people in there are going to be Chinese, so he stood out anyway. But he was not even your ex-pat kind-of person because that's something you'd expect to see— we dress more casually over there. I just wondered who this person was and what he was doing there and, I don't know, maybe some of my imaginations or neuroses came and crept in there but I wanted to do something with that idea and I didn't know how to do that in China, so I —and this is going back to that places—we-used-to-be— Ohio and Kentucky seem to keep coming back into my stories lately

because I'm removed from it enough but it was significant enough that I have enough experience that I can invest the story with some real time feeling, or some meat to the potatoes — so I planted him in Ohio, I kept the bathroom, the bloody nose. Gatsby might've inspired the rest of it. I don't know where that came from.

I like to deal with psychology. I do like relationships— men, women, any kind of relationship, I like having something of that in there. It seems accessible to readers. Philosophy does not sell very well. I can't imagine why.

(Laughter on our part. Tim turned the questioning back on us, inquiring about us and mentioning how he'd found the Bacon in the first place and why we'd stuck as one of the journals he reads. He passed along some sage advice inspired by his brother's interest in reading our site on his cell phone.)

EW: How do you find yourself reading online?

I had the Kindle for awhile. It's funny because you talk about going ludite. When you first go to China you do become a ludite or you go hard-tech because you can get anything there. You can either bury yourself in your apartment and become a hermit and type

away at your desktop or you can start playing with all the new things.

It took me a couple years to get more savvy. Now I find myself wanting more electronic stuff, so I started with the Kindle and now I'm actually reading off of this surface.

(He indicates at the device off-screen)

My brother jokes, but I think he's actually right: you're going to find people going to the smallest and easiest piece to carry with them. We're going to start reading like that. I must've bought 150 books on Kindle, which I would never have been able to buy or bring over to China just for shipping costs alone. So, if I'm answering your question correctly, I think I'm going more and more electronic; I'm looking for more and more ways to find an easy quick read. It can be any story as long as I get it in a format that I can read and get comfortable with. The size of the story wouldn't matter to me.

JH: You may be one of the only people that says the size of the story doesn't matter. I just find that a lot of people won't read longer than a page or two.

(Tim asked after flash fiction, whether it's submitted

or not, leading to discussion on attention spans and the possibility of making more efficient access to *The Bacon*.)

We're lazy I think. We're getting lazier. We have so many options it's getting impossible to pick so you find someone to trust and you say, okay this is where I'm going to get my news or where I'm going to get my reading and short stories. If you could somehow get a subscription where people *receive* the *Bacon Review*, I think they'd be happy with that— I'd be happy with that. You could highlight stories that you want us to pay attention to and then we could dig in later.

EW: True. Another computing thing I'd have to learn how to make a pdf version of the BR but it certainly could be done, it's being done elsewhere. A good idea.

JH: I agree. It's like Short Story Thursdays.

Yeah, something like that.

And you're right, Jessica—the flash fiction. I've got some flash fiction stories and I was trying to figure out what and who wants flash fiction and there's no real rules. There's a magazine called 100 Word Stories and

you can only write one hundred words. It can't be less than a hundred or more than a hundred. Some people think it's less than 1500 words, some people think it's 500 words or less. It's a grey area.

EW: Do you ever set up boundaries around your writing? Before you get started do you provide yourself a structure?

Well, nope. I've been doing this a long time but I've only been trying to publish a short time, which, advice to young writers: *don't do it that way*. Go ahead. Get your nose bloody. Send some things out, learn what works and doesn't work *that way*. I've got into a habit where my writing style is to pick up images or something I see like at a coffee shop or that comes to you at the end of the night or wake up in the morning feeling something, then I might let it cook for awhile. I used to try to write it down right away and then maybe come back to it later and I like it when I do that because I don't forget what I was thinking, but as far as boundaries, am I going to write a short story, a novel; am I going to write flash fiction or genre or something like that, no. I'm very eclectic. I think the boundary comes when I want to go see where to sell it.

If I've got a short story that I feel is ready, I'll sell it to people who seem to publish short stories. If I've got flash fiction, then I'll try to sell it to them. If I have a poem, then I'll go look at poets / poetry magazines. I don't think boundaries work for me. If I start with a boundary, I won't get it done— it'll be too constricted. I let the story tell me what to do.

But I might not be the best guy to ask about this either, because I met a young writer and he asked me some advice and at the end of the conversation he said, *you pretty much told me to do everything my creative writing teachers told me not to do*, and I said there you go.

(Tim raises his hands)

Don't pay attention to what I have to say. Do what they told you to do.

EW: I don't know. You're out there getting published from Shanghai, or near Shanghai, so whatever works.

Whatever works. That's it. Write what you have to write and then see if you can find a publisher but then after that, if you're getting frustrated with not getting published then you might have to look into: *how do I make the story*.

Whats happening right now is we've got a lot of great prose writers, wonderful prose writers, beautiful –and i was guilty of this for a long time– I'd try to write my best prose into every line, but you have to have story. *Prince of the Blue Castles* was not something I would write ten years ago when I was going to write the Great American Novel.

JH: So is there a difference in the publishing culture between China and the US?

I wouldn't know, because I have not tried to get published in China. I hear stories– they're seriously socially networked, even though there's a lot of firewalls (for example, I can't get Facebook in China). Their approved social networks are very strong, so when you want to publish a story it's very possible you submit a story on a social network and suddenly 5000 people are reading that, because you're talking massive numbers in China, 1.6 billion or whatever it is now. Even a small read is a big read. They're doing a lot of that to catapult themselves into publishing and so forth. If you can say 5000 people are reading you, the book publishing companies will come find you.

JH: I like to hear that, because that's my business, social media.

(Tim queried Jess as to what she is up to, aside from The Bacon, and this will serve as a lovely place to hear from her on her in her own words, to introduce you, Reader)

JH: I run a bookstore for a non-profit. That's my day job. Then, social media, I have done a few websites here and there, a little bit of graphic design but not in the way that Eric does. And, I am working on starting– I work at the Mono Lake Committee, which, Mono Lake is in California, a fairly special place right outside of Yosemite National Park and there's a publisher who does small independent pieces –usually a lot of short stories and essays– and we're going to do a collection of non-fiction about the lake. We're sending out stuff to nature writers, collecting some John Muir to get that going. It's fairly place-based, so not in China or anything like that.

You know a big challenge to get published in China is that the English as a second language– they're not very fluent. The younger people are more fluent than

the older people. They're going to translate whatever you give them and then it might explode, but after that you might not see the money.

(Jess touched on foreigners in California and the odd wonders of working at a non-profit bookstore wherein people will gladly pay full price for damaged goods simply because it's for a cause. She is writing, particularly nature-focal, and is not seeking to get published at this point.)

Don't wait. That's the only advice I give to young writers that I meet, that i'm sure is good advice. I waited a long time just so I could find that 'right niche' or so that the writing was perfect. Go get it. Send it out, try to see how people react to it, because you're not going to hurt any kind of reputation and you'll learn so much more about what you want to write about and how you want to write about it when you hear back from people. You'll hear this one didn't work, this one *did* work, but didn't fit for us (you get a lot of that) and you'll get some confidence about what you want to do.

JH: That's good advice. What is the benefit of being published?

It doesn't hurt. It does give you confidence. It does

give you confidence. Then you get hungry again, too. The first one is kind of nice. It's like, okay, I've got this publication but now I want to go to another publication. We all would like to have that JK Rowling / Stephen King financial independence and worldwide reading, but I don't think that's going to happen to all of us.

We do want to have our pieces read by as many people as we can and what happened to me is I was so determined to be good, you know, *good* –people read it and think oh, this is a good writer we have to publish it, even if you have a good story.

(Tim's advice is interrupted by a flurry of activity as my house is overrun by women, dogs and party-goers.)

EW: Eah, a party. Sorry. Excuse the– my brother is actually moving to the mountains tomorrow.

(Brief chaos. Smiles.)

But yeah, don't hesitate to send some stuff out because it'll give you more confidence and you also get a hard edge to yourself where you say, okay I know I like this piece and maybe no one else likes it but I had to write it to get to the next piece. And you never know, it may come around and someday someone else wants

it, but i think it's important early on to get in. I wish I had started 20 years ago submitting stuff. I only started submitting three years ago— just had this vision that I was going to have everything lined up ready to go, *here you go* and nah— have to go through the process to figure out what works and what doesn't.

EW: Well, you drop in with a lot of poise and that's something that your work —while we pull as creamy a thing as we can off the top of *The Bacon*.. one second..

(I roll back to turn off an overhead light the party-goers had just turned on.)

EW: Apologize, I don't like overhead lights. its a neurose.

I'll put that in my next story, Eric.
(Laughter)

EW: Yeah, the guy who could never live with an overhead light.

The poise though. I don't know if we've seen the

end of the unraveling of your work. We don't have a lot of people that walk in who have as much control of their stories as you do and there's something really cool that were getting to do with 1) only publishing four pieces but also 2) publishing whatever the fuck we want, where we can throw some really weird high-energy stuff purely based on it its desire to write, which sells itself, and i think its a rare rare turn that you have in that not only is the desire to write in there, but it's also leaked out at such a good pace that I never felt concern that I wasn't going to finish your story.

Thank you, thank you so much. I do appreciate that.

It's funny— I think that if you want to try to assess your writing you would probably try to pick the pieces that other people don't like. Send out everything, everything that you think is pretty good. Don't send out stuff that you know needs work but send out everything you think is pretty good, because you never know what people are going to respond to.

The last two stories I've had published, I did at my brother's house while I was on vacation and they were just kind of, *I'm going to try to write a story story*, and i'd been doing these 15-20 years of philosophy and beautiful prose and i do love those stories [the philosophical

ones]; I want them to be read, but I didn't have a story story, and I think I had to do the twenty years so I could do what you're talking about, Eric, where I can have the poise. The writers that I like have the same. That's what i try to emulate. I say, how can I pick up this book and not feel like i'm reading something.

You know— I get immersed in the story and i want to read it and I trust a writer, and you never know when you're going to come across it and it takes some time in your own writing to get to where you know that's what you want because I know what you're talking about — when I was younger I had a lot of that passion and thought that passion was worth publishing. It's there, but it's not maybe not something that people are going to want to read. I think there's writers who are in younger stages who could do *that*—who can do passion and poise— and I think that they're publishing; I think they're sending it out and they're getting a reaction.

It might be easier for some, but as I've said, the moves you have to go through, the pain— practicing the poise and learning that it's okay to come back to the story. Or maybe it's the other way around. Maybe they've got a great story and they just need to learn how to put the poise in. That takes time and getting

good feedback.

One thing I like about your magazine is your interviews. I was sitting there reading one — Parmalee Paula Cover— and I'm like, *how am i going to top phone sex*. I mean what kind of— I have no stories like that, or if I did I certainly wouldn't be telling you that, but one of the cool things is hearing in your interviews writers who are going through the same experiences, whether it's young writers bicycle messaging or someone on the other end of it, who's been doing it for a long time.

They all have these similar experiences and when you're younger, at least when I was younger, I thought I just had to read the best, and that's all I need to do, then just keep writing writing writing. But you do actually have to get into a community. You do actually have to talk to people, publishers like yourself, get some feedback from them —get your nose bloody a few times, so to speak— when they say, *nope, this one didn't work* even though it might be a good story, even though it might be something you really love, you have to go through that process I think, and hope that it happens.

But all that being said, Borges's father told him don't be quick to publish— and here I am saying send everything in, but he [Borges] was apparently very careful about what he was going to send in and he

agonized and made sure it was going to be the very best. I think that's the secret to the poise: that you keep working on it that way. I shouldn't say this but as I was reading my story in *The Bacon*, there was a moment or two, a sentence or two, a word or two, that I was like, *give it back to me, Eric*. Let me just cut that out or polish that up a little bit more. Maybe that happens to everybody. It's very rare that any of us gets it 100% perfect and they're usually in those classic bookcases that Jessica sets up.

EW: And they usually have four prefaces at different points in the author's life where she's like oh, fucked that up, fucked that up, fucked that up.

Yeah yeah, and even Borges, even he changed some stories after he got published, when he had a chance to rewrite. Don't be quick to publish but don't be afraid to get out there and do something.

EW: How about a little extrapolation on how Borges affects you.

Big time. When I say that, there seems to be a writer that I come across every five or ten years where I say,

ope, this is it— now I've got the guy or the woman that I want to write just like, and I only first started really reading him two three years ago, and I read his poetry and his fiction cover to cover. I still carry the poetry book around read that.

I thought, where was this guy when I was younger, when I was twenty or so. When I could've used him. And i'm sure somebody told me to read him and I didn't.

What I liked about him: here's a guy who clearly made it look easy. I mean he can be very dense if you want to see it that way, but he's a short story writer—I don't know if he's got a story longer than 25 or 30 pages— but what he packs in that 25 or 30 pages! Every word, every sentence. You talk about your poise, it's all there.

And I love paradox. I wrote my dissertation on paradox. I used Chuang Tzu and Kierkegaard, liked what they were doing with that, so when I read him I thought okay, not only can I do paradoxical writing and things that don't make sense (except they do make sense in some ways), but i can do it in short form. They don't have to be long, they can be tight.

He is and continues to be a very big inspiration to me.

There's some others. Roger Zelazny is a fiction writer. Talk about again, poise, great story. People I know don't like science fiction, I'll give him to them and I know they'll enjoy the story. He's really a writer who wrote science fiction. He's very good.

This is terrible, I know, but I don't keep up on modern fiction very well and I don't really like to read contemporary writers. It's all in my head, I know, but I'm so afraid that I'll read something that will influence me; I don't want to accidentally copy somebody. I don't want to read something in another form and say, oh no, it's already been published. I feel safer picking tried and true writers that I had in the past and just reading them over and over again.

Also, I think it helps me with my writing, because I know they're good and if I read them over and over it helps me get my tone and my rhythms and my voice and so forth. I don't know who it was –maybe one of you two knows– one of the Brontes or Austen would take a story, read a page or a paragraph, close the book, and try to re-write the paragraph exactly as they read it.

They were just trying to learn how to write. I use this in my classes when I'm trying to teach the students as well. But I couldn't do that–

(He laughs.)

I'm just too lazy– I'd much rather read the same story over and over and over again and hope that somehow osmotically it's just getting inside my head. Not just the story, but the way they set up the story; the way they write; the way they stop their sentences or continue their sentences; the way they can jump into the scene instead of building the scene. Those kinds of things.

Raymond Chandler is another great example. I can give somebody –you know– *I don't like thrillers, I don't like detective novels*. Just try this: Raymond Chandler. Even though everybody knows Philip– well, maybe not. Maybe people don't know Philip Marlowe anymore, but when I read him –and again, I came into this late, I came into this a couple years ago (Kindle)– okay, I'll try *the Big Sleep* or something like that and I'm like, what am I doing!? Why did I miss this ride?

I feel like I'm babbling – is this what usually happens in your interviews?

EW: It seems like you're babbling, but when we play it back, it's usually pretty precise. It's just amazing how parenthetical– when asked a question, you're on the spot. The amount of commas I end up writing out. I hand-type all these after I play back the recording, and

it is its own exercise in learning how humans speak.

I told my wife –I did read your interviews– I told her, he writes down every little detail sometimes so if you walk behind me..

EW: Yeah, I saw her twice already.

(Conversation pattered into discussion on old interviews, on Bill Lavender’s shifting about his house, and Jess begged out for a dinner date. My grandparents arrived, meaning the party was in full swing and so we said our goodbyes)

I wish there was something more substantial– was there anything else you wanted to know?

EW: I think well be surprised as to how much substance is already here.

(A thank-you here, in Edit-mode, to Tim for sitting down with us, for the heaps of advice he levelled against both The Bacon’s future as well writing and publishing.)