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AN INTERVIEW WITH JIM SHEPARD
SARAH ASWELL & BEN FOWLKES

Jim Shepard is the author of five novels, including Project X and Nosferatu, as well as the highly acclaimed short story collection, Love and Hydrogen. He teaches at Williams College in Massachusetts and was this year's Engelhard Writer-In-Residence at The University of Montana. Recently, he sat down to talk with CutBank editor Sarah Aswell and prose board member Ben Fowlkes over whiskey at Missoula's Union Club.

Ben Fowlkes: How do you respond to criticism that you lack a signature style?

Jim Shepard: People have been pissed off about that for a while. I get these reviews where people say 'Shepard always seems to be writing something different,' and I'm like, 'sorry.' But there also has been a way in which booksellers have told me that because they can't turn me into a brand. They have a lot of trouble selling me to the casual reader who asks 'What should I read?' And they say, 'Have you tried Jim Shepard?' And when people ask them, 'What does he write?' they say "Well, he writes a lot of different stuff,' and because of that hemming and hawing they just say, 'Who else have you got?' They can't just tell people I write a lot about the South and antebellum family drama, and that is one of the comforts of genre.

For a certain reader, there is a comfort in it, like when you read Cormac McCarthy and you know what's coming; that's a real pleasure. For some reason, I don't give my reader that pleasure. Part of it is continually wanting to interest myself, and part of it is wanting to continually enlarge that area of experience from

which I write. One of the ways I do that is by reading a lot and talking to experts in various fields.

Sarah Aswell: Talking to experts in various fields? Are you looking through the phone book?

Jim Shepard: That's one of the good things about being in an academic setting. Williams is not huge but it's pretty prestigious, so I can ask someone who I should talk to about the Soviet space program and they can tell me. As far as research goes, I've managed to work out a life where I can read whatever I want. I'm enough of a writer at this point that whenever I pick up a book, I have that in the back of my mind, thinking, I wonder if this could turn into something. I don't think, 'Now I'm going to write about the Soviet space program.' I'll often read stuff that engenders nothing, and some of my students ask, 'Don't you feel like you've wasted all that time?' But I'm enough of a nerd that I feel like, 'Hey, I got to read for three weeks about Vikings.'

SA: So you read a lot of nonfiction?

Jim Shepard: I read a ton of nonfiction. In fact, like a lot of fiction writers I know, I have to work to keep up with contemporary fiction because I read a lot of nonfiction. I read the fiction by my friends, and then I read the classical stuff that I never read but should have. So between all those things and having a life, it's sometimes difficult to save enough time to read new, young fiction writers.

SA: Have you found any new fiction writers that have caught your eye?

Jim Shepard: I don't know how new they are, but people like Ken Kalfus and others who are writing stories that range all over the map.

BF: What's the last book you read that really had an impact on you?

Jim Shepard: *Gilead*, probably—Marilynne Robinson book. She's only written two novels, *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, which is a first person narrative of a 72-year-old Episcopalian minister who's realizing he doesn't have much time to live. He's writing the story of his life to his young son and observing his son as he's doing this. It's theatrically unambitious in terms of plot, and you're thinking that she can't pull this off because the investment of drama is entirely in voice. I think a lot of the voices that we're taken with are obsessive in some ways.

SA: What about nonfiction?

Jim Shepard: I'm reading a big history of the San Francisco earthquake. I just read an autobiography of Levon Helm, the drummer from The Band. I have this weird stack of things that I pick around in. The librarian at Williams about a year ago asked me, 'What do you do?' I think at the time I had a book about scorpions or something that I was checking out and she was probably thinking, 'Who is this person?'

There are some subjects that I can't imagine being interested enough in to write about, like math, which I don't understand well enough to be into. Sometimes it's really a matter of a dawning emotional resonance. It's not a matter of whether I think it's interesting enough. I think that's a mistake that's easy to make, to think you're looking for a good story, and there are a million good stories, but what makes some stand out is that emotional resonance. Once I came across this stuff about Charles Lindbergh and the Spirit of St. Louis, and I was reading about how he was preparing for the thirty-hour flight but had insomnia the three days before the flight. He realized that this was no good because in an airplane with no windshield for thirty hours he might fall asleep during the flight and that would be it. So he conceived of a plan of talking to himself out loud for thirty hours. I read this and thought, What could he have said to himself for thirty hours? So for about six months I read about Charles Lindbergh, thought it was all interesting and learned a lot of stuff I didn't know before. But I got to the end and decided I couldn't write about it.

SA: Do you have a formula for finding emotional resonance?

Jim Shepard: It's not a formula so much as an intensiveness and a way of reading. It's reading for those moments that create more of a stir in you. It's something that I didn't have much of an ability with early in my career. I read a lot but often I could only conceive of how to apply it in a character who's obsessive about these things. If you look at *Love and Hydrogen* you can see early versions of it with "Krakatau" or "Mars Attacks," and those were easy ways into it. But quickly I began to realize that I didn't need that. There's something deadening about that model for a story, so I came up with some of the stranger stuff when I dropped it. Now I'll get people in Q & As who say, 'What makes you think you can write about a gay German filmmaker in the twenties?' and I'll say, 'What makes you think you can write about your sister?' It's all a matter of empathetic imagination, of creating a passable illusion on the basis of very few details. It's really about imagination for me—why were we given this amazing thing if we're not going to screw around with it?

The new collection is all first person narration. My agent, who is despairing of ways to sell my stuff, asked me about doing a book of all first person narrators. I had nine stories at that point. When I went back and looked at how many of those were first person, I realized they were all first person. Almost none of them are contemporary though. That comes from, I think, a different approach to nonfiction.

BF: Do you think of yourself as a writer's writer?

Jim Shepard: No, I don't. I'm often described that way as a complement, which really means, 'Writers like him but nobody else has heard of him.' Ron Hansen interviewed me and asked that question and I said I get that in a lot of reviews and I think it's code for, the only people who have read this guy are writers. The best evidence I have that I'm not a writer's writer is that I win almost no awards. I'd think a writer's writer would be getting awards all the time, but, as I told Ron, I've won fewer literary awards than Charo.

SA: How do you explain this weird gap between being a cult figure in M.F.A. programs and then not seeing someone read your book on a plane?

Jim Shepard: I was really struck when I was touring for *Project X* and *Love and Hydrogen* how if I went to Brooklyn, I'd get 150 people, and if I went to Boston, I'd get 8. I'm beginning to realize that my demographic is twenty-something or thirty-something. Some of that has to do with the McSweeney's crowd, like Dave Eggers, who have been really active. I'm happy with it the way it is. The world leaves me alone and I get to do whatever I want to do, which is pretty great.

BF: Do you think some of that has to do with you being a kind of master of the short story, which is a form read almost exclusively by writers?

Jim Shepard: I'd like to think that was it. I'd love to think of myself as a master of the short story, but that takes us back to the Charo moment. Part of it might be that in M.F.A. programs, there are more young writers excited about taking risks and are drawn to my stuff. When I first started out, the writers that excited me the most were the ones that I read and thought, 'Can you do that? Isn't there a rule about that? Is that literature, using a voice that doesn't sound like Henry James?'

BF: What do you make of all the M.F.A. programs popping up?

Jim Shepard: Well, it's such a money-making program for academia, for the universities. You just hire a couple of writers, set aside a classroom and you've got an M.F.A. program. I don't get all worked up about what a horrible thing it is for American literature because I've never believed that M.F.A. programs create a homogenized kind of fiction. Maybe they do that to an extent, but if you're a writer and you're at all interesting and you go to a place where everyone is doing dull stuff, you'll kind of rebel.

The other thing you worry about with a multitude of M.F.A. programs is whether they are taking people's money and filling them with false hope? Yeah.

Of course they are. But I wouldn't say that an M.F.A. program that doesn't churn out a bunch of successful writers is a failure by any means. If they're doing a good job of teaching, they should be churning out more readers, and more sophisticated readers. God knows we could use that. If a program were to produce a huge number of committed readers and no writers that we've heard of, God bless them.

SA: Do you think writing is teachable?

Jim Shepard: No, but I think development is acceleratable. I sometimes teach in programs like Breadloaf or Tin House, and I'll often get students in their sixties or seventies who have usually been writing for a while and there's always that poignant moment when they say, 'Ah, I wish I'd known that twenty years ago.' Obviously, writers develop at their own pace, but I think a good editor and a good teacher can accelerate that development.

SA: Tell us a little about your development as a writer. Do you think you were you born a writer?

Jim Shepard: I don't know if I was born a writer. I used to write stuff when I was little and I thought I would always do that, but I thought I would do it the way somebody shoots baskets or goes for a run. When I was in third or fourth grade, I remember thinking that I would always write in some form, but it seemed entirely possible that it would be a completely private and shameful thing that I did. That seemed like a plausible and non-tragic future. I came from a family where nobody had gone to college and so the idea that I would have a literary or intellectual life was not really an option.

My secret plan for a long time was that I would be a veterinarian and I would write privately and nobody would know. Then I discovered that veterinarians had to do more than just play with dogs. Then my secret plan was that I would write and not make any money at it but people would give me food, just hand me food because I seemed pitiful.

I always thought I would write fiction because it seemed like more fun to make stuff up. I never thought about being a writer until I started selling stories as an undergraduate. I was a person with no other real options. It was like, 'Do I want to go to an M.F.A. program, or...you know, I can't do anything.' When I told my father that I was going to pursue writing, he said to me, 'You know, writing could be a pretty tough nut to crack.' And I just thought, What wouldn't be a tough nut for me to crack? I mean, sanitation engineer, whatever, I can't do anything. I think writers, ordinarily, have pretty low horizons. You ask them what they think they'll be doing next year and they're just worried about the next paragraph. You're not thinking, In five years will I have written seven novels or six? You're really thinking, How am I going to finish page twelve?

SA: You've said before that you don't think you're really a natural novelist. Do you still think that today?

Jim Shepard: I don't know. All of my novels, except *Project X*, start really slowly and dick around for a long time before they gather speed. They're also very episodic. All of them have the strengths and weaknesses of *Nosferatu* where there certainly isn't a really good through-line. Maybe that means I'm just not a very good traditional novelist. I don't have any novels that I think are as strong as my short stories. There are parts of them I really like, and parts I read now that are shocking in a way.

It's almost as if someone showed you a video of your first date. You'd have just enough narcissism to be intrigued by it, and there'd be some parts where you'd even think you're cute, and then there'd be other moments where you'd just say, 'Turn it off!' It's like my first published short story, "Eustace," which was published in *The Atlantic*. I only sent off because my teachers told me I should. Then when they took it I just thought, cool. I didn't realize what an incredibly big deal it was until I was walking down the hall at my college and a poet who taught there who I'd never talked to stopped me and said, 'Shepard, did you just have a story taken by *The Atlantic*?' And when I told him I did he just said, 'Shit!'

BF: Can you tell us a little about your process for writing a short story?

Jim Shepard: Well, one of the things that I like about short stories, especially in the first person, is the way my narrators have no patience for the literary mistake of middling around. I sort of did a clumsier version of it with the football story, “Messiah.” That’s what I’ve been trying to teach myself to do with these obsessive voices. All that throat clearing of traditional short stories is something you have to get past as quickly as possible in order to get to that essential question, “Why am I reading this?” I’m stopping my life for this, but why? I want a voice to come across right away and say, “You want to know why you’re reading this? Here’s why.” With “Glut Your Soul,” that’s pretty much where I started—trying to tap into that adolescent rage where everything just fucking stinks. It’s a great way to hit the ground running because those people, when I was one of them and when I knew them, really didn’t dither around in the beginning. It’s really a great introduction to extreme emotional states, which is really important to me. It’s not so much that I would whittle it down with a story like that. It’s more that I would wait for a coalescing voice in my head to come up with something like that to get me going.

BF: What about with a story like “Runway” where we’re not sure where it’s going for a few pages?

Jim Shepard: I think you’re right, that’s a very different model. That’s one I wrote at Brown, and it’s very much an example of someone twisting a traditional story model into the weird. Back then I was more patient with the traditional story opening. I’m not sure I would write “Runway” the same way if I wrote it today. In fact, I sent that story to *The Atlantic* in an earlier form and they really liked it but they wanted it explained why he was lying on the runway. I felt like that was the one thing I didn’t want to do. Of course, I didn’t want to not be published in *The Atlantic* because by then I knew what a big deal it was, so I thought, Let’s see what I can do in the way of non-explanation explanations. I put those in there and *The Atlantic* editor said, “This is not an explanation.” I tried three, or four of those and

then finally told him I couldn't do it the way he wanted and they wouldn't publish it. Then I sent it to *Harper's* and they published it, so it had a happy ending. It was a good way to figure out that there was a strangeness that I was wedded to that would mean less success for me, but the whole point in that story was that there is an oblique place where you can't go.

BF: For you as a reader, what makes a good story?

Jim Shepard: One thing I really look for is an extremely high rate of revelation, where we're learning something new on every page. The writers who I admire most are doing that all the time.

BF: Who are some writers you admire?

Jim Shepard: Amy Hempel, Charles Baxter, Ron Hansen, Deborah Eisenberg. You never feel like you can just skip a page without missing anything important. They're all very different writers, so it's really a matter of how much I think I'm learning about human beings at any given moment.

BF: What do you make of the publishing trend moving away from new fiction and toward memoir and other nonfiction?

Jim Shepard: There are so many movements that are depressing that are overlaying each other right now. It's hard to know which is generating which. There are fewer readers in general, which means there are fewer serious readers in general, which means there are even fewer serious readers of fiction in general. As publishing houses change their philosophy from one where they're willing to take chances and settle for breaking even sometimes, to one where they think they need to make money with everything they do, that means all sorts of valuable writing is going to be pushed out to the margins.

With memoir, it's not too difficult to connect that trend to the trend of reality

television. But I know a ton of people, intelligent people, who say things like, “When I read, I want to learn something, so I read nonfiction or self-help books.” Memoir plugs into that, but it also plugs into this narcissistic trend in our culture. The whole James Frey thing makes clear what the values are for people. They need to know that this really happened to somebody, and then the quality of the narrative is beside the point. It was striking the number of people who, before the Frey story broke, told me, ‘You have to read this. You cannot believe the shit that goes on in this book.’ And that was seen as incredibly high praise for a memoir. If you said that about a novel, it wouldn’t be praise at all, which means that there’s a sort of free pass that people give to a memoir. That’s why Frey did what he did—he knew he couldn’t get that free pass otherwise.

SA: Do you think you have a job or responsibility as a writer?

Jim Shepard: Yeah, I don’t think I’m writing just to make noise. I can’t think of any writer who I admire who isn’t motivated politically in some way. Even writers who spend a lot of time burlesquing the notion of political writing, like Nabokov for example, I would say are quite political. You get Nabokov going on a subject like the Russian Revolution and you know exactly where he stands. You also know what his values are, and if you know what someone’s values are, you usually know how that would translate to any given political situation. What would Nabokov think of George W. Bush? Not much.

SA: Is that how you get your politics across in fiction? Through values? Because your work doesn’t seem extremely political, even when you’re writing about John Ashcroft.

Jim Shepard: When I first sent that story to *Harper’s*, they were very excited about the idea of a story from John Ashcroft’s perspective, but then they refused to publish it because they said it was too easy on Ashcroft. I think it’s a mistake to read that story and go, ‘Wow, this guy loves John Ashcroft.’

On the other hand, it's clearly an exercise in stretching my empathetic imagination. It's like trying to write from the point of view of a villain or a monster or someone you usually can't empathize with. That story began because I was working on another story and I came across this news report of him having settled with the tobacco companies, one of the first things he did when he took over the Justice Department. I thought, How do you live with yourself when you do that? So I tried to immerse myself in his speeches and writings and theories, trying to figure it out. Clearly, this isn't a guy who's crying himself to sleep every night. What does he say to himself? That's how it all started. My writer friends joked, after I published that story, that I should get ready with my audit. But in a way, it fulfills that impotent rage that I feel when I read about some of these things in the newspaper.

