

Eric Seiley

Big Words, Small Essays

22 April 2024

690 Words

One More Thing with B.J. Novak

I kept listening for the voice that made B.J. Novak famous as a writer for the mega-hit NBC television series, *The Office*, which aired between 2005 and 2013 and made Novak a household name. But all I could hear reading Novak's "collection" of short stories, *One More Thing: Stories and Other Stories* (2014), was the snarky voice of your typical college student trying to write satirically. Or maybe that was the point, and Novak's voice after all.

I had another problem reading Novak's "short stories." They weren't really short stories. More an accumulation of unconnected, anecdotal tales, not very well told. Which the book jacket blurb described as "*From an actor, writer, and director of the hit TV comedy The Office (US version): a story collection that was "workshopped" at comedy clubs and bookstores on both coasts.*" Workshopped at comedy clubs and workshops? Not your typical venue for authors of fiction.

Now, I'm not such a literary stickler to insist that every short story maintain a classic structure at all times. I'll leave that to the likes of John Cheever and O. Henry. Nor do I believe good works of fiction can't come in different formats, invention, and size. Some of the best pieces I ever read contained unconventional structure and narrative voices. But Novak's fifty odd anecdotal riff-offs were so very, very *NOT* short stories. Or even very good. Not to mention they were too maddeningly self-aware to the point I could picture Novak sitting at his vintage reproduction hipster typewriter in his tiny dorm

room, with white on white heavy bond paper inserted around the roll, 'clack-clack-clacking' and 'peck-peck-pecking' away, as our clever boy thought, "Oh, wouldn't this be witty to write? Oh, what if I pushed this platitude here? Oh, what if I subverted the relationship of that paradigm there?" Full of anecdotes that were decidedly not funny or very clever to begin with. Told in an inexperienced, know-it-all style. Very frustrating.

In short, reading Novak's "collection" was a disappointing and unpleasant experience. On par with listening to some annoying liberal arts college freshman, home for Christmas break, pontificating in rambling fashion about the philosophies they recently learned and now were absolute believers in. Till sophomore year's sociology and theology courses kicked in.

As far as Novak's collection goes, I was in on his witticisms, disappointed by his muddled efforts to write poignant stories wrapped in gossamers of sarcasm, and bored watching him wrestle the English language into intellectual tidbits of effecting prose. Just one more English major writing in pale imitation of Evelyn Waugh.

For a short afternoon, I bore with all of B.J.'s tiresome soliloquies, but the whole time I was thinking, "Yeah, kid, I wanted to be P.G. Wodehouse too. But I wouldn't go out and publish my college-aged drivel onto an unsuspecting world at any price."

Well, honestly, that's not true. I probably would if I had also been in B.J. Novak's shoes at the time. Depending on how much money was promised, I suppose. But I at least would've added a disclaimer so the reader was aware.

There is a brighter ending here though. If *One More Thing* was Novak's freshman efforts at meaningful writing -- which he shamelessly cashed in on with his post-"Office" iron striking hot, then at least he made a better accounting of himself with his

sophomore effort titled *Vengeance* – a 2022 movie he wrote, directed, and starred in that displayed a far superior personability and skill in writing.

As of today, I am still unsure about Novak. He may develop into a more sophisticated snark, similar to television writer / producer Larry David, and originate better biting satire. Or he may, like the legion of SNL alum before him, rip off one more piece of doggerel after another, weakening a once potentially great talent. Either way, Novak has experienced enough professional success and accolade this decade, it is doubtful he'll stop now. His future work, and time, will tell if he can cement his comedy legacy or if he'll be another near miss who couldn't mature in their work.

The End.