

# INTERVIEW # 1 (Fiction)

Fiction Editor **JOEY CRUSE** interviews author **NICK NORTH**

When I was approached by Tom and Charles about interviewing one of the fiction writers in Issue 9, they left me on my own to select an author of my choice. I chose Nick because his writing is the most difficult. How he writes grates upon me. It just literally isn't my style. I can read it and understand it, I can hope he wasn't talking down to me (I don't think he was, but for some reason my ego goes there first - if I have to work to figure out what you're saying then why couldn't I have just read it?). He was the one I wanted to grill the hardest because, at times, his style infuriated me. He's like an e.e. cummings of fiction and part of me can't stand that. I know that he is educated, well read, intelligent, all the adjectives, but I can't figure out why he treats the reader that way. Do you want them to understand you (one way or the other I don't think he does cause that doesn't entirely matter) or do you want them to *feel*? Because 1) you know they can't, and/or don't have enough time to care, 2) haven't accepted they've gone through enough school like you to be, "oh, he fits in with a literary or artistic style and the history of them," (and that's fine because he's playing with those writers/characters who played with others), 3) he's just done with caring about the reader making any meaning apart from their own understanding in the sense that he's creating product that should take them to another level of thinking (which I certainly am not), or 4), and I say this with lightness, does he just look down on others and is trying to save the concepts of literature, education, and the malleability of style (that one I don't care about as much because the reader is on their own, but if we'd be like to be read should at least be readable)?

**JC:** I've read "3 Primary Colors," your work in the current issue, "Carver in My Eyes" (a poor translation because I don't feel like fucking with Latin), and I'd actually be curious if you've seen my WILI for "The Veil of Appearance" (which had to be adjusted accordingly) before we got to where we are here. So, first thing first, describe your concept of a metaphor – I apologize because I can only shape questions as essentially a comp exam question – and your interpretation of perception and writing your world down would be?

**NN:** My interest in fiction right now is not about telling stories. So I'm less interested in the 'content' of any one fiction, than its formal properties. As I see it, narrative fiction is just an apparatus to deliver the author's ideas—which in most cases have to do with human experience—people's lives, what happens to them, what psychological truths blah blah blah. But if you take the 'content' away from fiction, what is left? Is there *anything* left? Rather than as a means—a way of relating information—I'm interested in looking at it as an end in itself.

Theoretically, the possibilities are endless. But how do you embrace them? It gets exciting for me when a story begins to have a life independent of the reader and independent of its content (and ideally, independent of its creator!). Traditionally modeled, linear narrative doesn't interest me. In *Coincidence is the Recreational Face of Irony* my intention was to show the same sequence of events from different viewpoints. In *The Conformist*, which is maybe my favourite story, nothing makes sense at first. The actions of Nick and Lenny are indecipherable and the 'world' they inhabit is upside down---but everything works if you grant this initial assumption. Their relationship is not actual but literary. They eventually, as the 'story' progresses, step outside of it into a metafictional reality. Experience is the key inspiration for most writers, I know, but not, at this point for me. My sources are intellectual not empirical. It's not 'art for art's sake' so much as a pursuit of formal possibilities—a deconstruction that in itself is a construction, different not in degree but kind.

**JC:** I noticed that you tend to write at all hours. Do you sleep? Do you consider writing and/or being awake work?

**NN:** Yes, writing is work for me—enjoyable but challenging and sometimes frustrating. This might have to do with the fact that I have marooned myself on a island in the sense that when I get stuck I can't pick up say *Infinite Jest* or *If, on a winter's night, a traveler...* and say 'Oh, that's how he did it!' It like driving to an unfamiliar destination without a map. But since writing this way is my choice, I find it exciting. I do a lot of revision and even a word will bother me for hours, days if it doesn't sound right or is not exactly the right word—Flaubert's *le bon mot*. I sleep and work like anybody else. I've never really written traditional narrative fiction. My earliest writing was micro-fictions through a bent lens. Here's one...the title is *Point Taken*.

Pam was always a thin woman. She ate like everybody else but never gained weight. After a while she started losing. She got thinner and thinner. Her clothes went from size small to XXX small. 'Next thing you know I'll be shopping for infants!' When she died a few weeks later she was no bigger than a speck. People looked everywhere for Pam but I was the one who eventually found her. If you look very closely you'll discover she is the dot at the end of this sentence but you may need a magnifying glass to see her.

**JC:** Prefacing: I do like the way in which you write. Questioning: Why do you make me work so fucking hard to understand your point? Is it because you think that I am a terrible reader, is the epistemology of art or language not enough, or is it because you are trying to tell me something about metaphor that I do not get? I say that because I think your style can go further.

**NN:** Epistemology of art not enough? My writing is mostly about what falls under epistemology. Do I make you work hard to understand what I'm saying? Well, that depends on what you expect, what you bring to the reading experience. If your idea of fiction is A and mine is B, yeah, you'll maybe have to scratch your head or stand back from your preconceptions. I don't expect everybody to 'love' what I write. But that's true for every author. You think my style can go further. So do I. The last part of *3 Primary Colours* called 'In the White Room' is, for me personally, the most interesting. I would disagree that the lack of words only points out that there is meaning in their lack, that the emptiness is somehow meaningful. Why does it have to be meaningful? My intention was to draw bald attention to the punctuation, that, and only that. There is nothing covert or subliminal in the empty space between them. It's probably something deep in our

circuitry that prompts us to supply meaning where there is none, to fill the void, so to speak. By seeing it *just for what it is*, a series of visual notations—out of their context as punctuation--we get to a new model of fiction. Fiction? Yeah, I see it as fiction. I mean, it's not nonfiction.

**JC:** What are your favorite movies? You've a Jodorowsky, Cronenberg, and/or Gondry frame of mind that, I think, gives you more of a cinematographer/director sense of impact upon the reader than a writer creating a sense. Your writing inherently lacks explanation (which is not a complaint), but, for your use of a blatant, blunt, and, at times, condescending style, do you consider your works written fiction, written moments, or you writing the moment as is? Do you treat writing as cinema at all?

**NN:** I like all kinds of movies—from film fest choices to Bollywood trash cinema. I especially like horror films and I think they've taken a bad rap. A lot of them are kitschy but a film like 'Texas Chainsaw Massacre' is an extraordinary example of cinematic art. Tobe Hooper, the director and creator, is a master of visual subtext. This is especially and ravishingly obvious in the very disturbing opening scene. The violence is always 'off screen' and for that reason it is all the more terrifying, at least for me, because it opens the door to our imaginings, which are sometimes more frightening than the reality of what we are observing.

You say 'I don't see what kinds of pictures the mind would pick up reading 9 ordinary words and 36 of their combinations. That's just it. You wouldn't, unless through free-association—oh, red is my fave colour or I love sunsets sort of stuff. The point is there is no point—the words are as they are and no more than they are. The sentence means something but I'm not approaching it from the point of meaning. I'm approaching it as a literary/intellectual construction, a string of words that start with a capital letter and end with a period. The combinations are just different 'models' of the sentence. The sentence, in and of itself, is any and all sentences. It doesn't matter what sentence you use. Jonah Howell wrote in his WILI that the 'tension' between the sentence and its transformations comprises the narrative. I liked that. The story is as much a device blueprint for possible fictions as anything else. It's a literary mechanism, exotic, rarefied to be sure. Fiction, a story, in my view, doesn't always have to 'mean' something. Why can't it exist

independently of ‘content’—to the extent it ever can—a thing in itself? Anyway, there’s storytelling and then there’s this.

My educational background is art and when you peruse through the different movements, trends, revolutions and counter-revolutions that comprise 20<sup>th</sup> Century art, you are bombarded by the grandeur of formal innovation. There is no such equivalency in 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature—well, from the second half of the century, I mean. I agree with Burroughs who wrote that 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature lags 50 years behind visual art in this regard. ‘Content’ or ‘subject matter’ has the upper hand, formal innovation is somewhere to the side. Even when breakthroughs are made—Joyce, Borges, David Foster Wallace, Italo Calvino—and even with some exceptions, the writings of Thomas Pynchon—they tend to ‘self-isolate’ to use a current term. You don’t get a spate of books in their style that forever changes the way fiction is written. But after Picasso and Braque invented Cubism, every artist was turning out Cubist paintings and more important and lasting for art, the idea of mimetic representation was dead. A picture—if you wanted to be taken seriously as an artist—was no longer a ‘window into reality’. And that still holds true today for the most part.

**JC:** Where did you grow up and what was your childhood like? Do you enjoy Seurat as much as Ferris Bueller? What is your favorite ice cream? If you had to go to another country because you did something terrible where you were living, say, dumping 90’s pooka shells (that was the stupidest thing I could think of) and oil by the liter (meh, metric measurements), then where would it be? Because, if and were that a real thing, I’d go on the pacific side of Argentina and walk off into the desert. How about you?

**NN:** I was born in Toronto but my family moved to Italy when I was three because of my Dad’s work. We lived there until I was fourteen—then back to Canada. My childhood brings happy memories. We travelled a lot when my Dad had time: our home base was Rome but we went all over the place. I like the south of Italy the best. My favourite city was Reggio-Calabria which is also the name of the administrative region. There are lots of ruins where the Greek influence is strong because they settled and colonized this region in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> BCE. Reggio-Calabria is right at the tip of Italy’s ‘boot’ facing the Strait of Messina. On a clear evening you can watch the sun go down over the water and once it has set,

see the lights twinkle in the coastal villages of Sicily. It's a beautiful experience. I've been back a few times but the country is changing rapidly.

I like both Seurat and Ferris Bueller. I like Borat too. I don't think Seinfeld is all that funny—but he's okay. Favourite ice cream? Vanilla spunk, of course. If I had to go on the lam it would probably be to Italy or Spain—it wouldn't be any place in North America. I've been to Argentina, so I might end up there. So who knows? Maybe we *will* meet up in the desert somewhere... Thanks for reading and writing about my stories for Fleas. I was impressed by 'She Was Australian' and I like how you write.

Nick,

I say this with all sincerity, hope that you understand, and love of late nights with alcohol: stop fucking with me and write a complete work: A short story, a poem, having poetics I don't need to explain, anything. There's beauty in your work, but not me working *that* hard to find said beauty and breaking it down for readers – the review shouldn't be explication or talking down to those who read your work. I hope you enjoy these questions as much as I did writing them. With all the respect I could convey in the concept of an interview, good work, truly, seriously, and without me appearing to be a dick if it came off that way (not my intention).

With all humility and humor,

Me. (Joey Cruse)

Nick North's stories *The Conformist* and *9 ordinary words and 36 of their combinations* were published in Issue 8. His story *Carver est in oculis meis: Coincidence is the Recreational Face of Irony* appeared in Issue 7. *She was Australian* by Joey Cruse was published in Issue 8.