

THE



INTERVIEW

Fiction Editor Joey Cruse with Jared Bentley

Welcome, Jared! Thanks for agreeing to this interview. I must say that I truly enjoyed your story and that the work and words held such emotion and heart that I actually felt something. I want to say empathy and hope, and that's appropriate, but I suppose, more importantly, I felt love – and that is a quality in a story that is hard to find. Thank you again for giving all our readers here at FOTD the opportunity to read it! Now, down to business...

JC: *Where did you learn such craft? Practice? Teachers? Writers? Humans? There is such control in this story and I'm curious who influenced you.*

JB: I studied Creative Writing at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. I wasn't much of a writer then, even if I thought I was. I realized that I never really had what people call "natural talent." What's funny is, I'm relatively proficient at a lot of things and if I'm not, I tend to abandon it. Writing seemed the opposite for me. I wasn't naturally good at it, but I found the

work to be fun. I have to give a lot of credit for my tutelage to Sean Prentiss and Austin Bunn (two of my professors at GVSU), for both encouraging their students to experiment and take risks.

I've always been a late bloomer, so my writing strengths took off in graduate school at Eastern Michigan University where I studied Rhetoric and Composition. Teaching writing myself allowed me to see student writing in abundance. I learned writing is dialogic, and talking about ideas makes them richer. I have to credit a lot of my analytical writing strength to my professor Derek Mueller and my sister, Meredith, both who helped me to say EXACTLY what I meant in a sentence.

I think I had to fail a lot in order to gain control over the prose you mentioned in this story. I still fail but that's part of the process. For this story specifically, I had a very different process than I normally do, since it's heavily influenced by Isaac Asimov's "The Last Question." If you haven't read it, I highly recommend it. I essentially took every scene as an outline and rewrote it while imitating his style. I was certain that science fiction fans would immediately get what I was doing, but the story quickly became its own thing, and the rest is history.

JC: *This is such a kind story, and, as I said above, there is such a sense of love within that it stuck out to me, and grabbed me, and made me experience emotion that I rarely see in writing (I feel that makes me sound emotionless or desensitized, but I do have emotions and latch on to them, I promise). I suppose my question is, and I mean this in the least offensive way I can muster, who hurt you? What taught you this sense of empathy?*

JB: I don't mean to laugh at your question but "haha." It reminds me of when one person is being a dick, and another character asks, "Who hurt you?" (essentially, "Why are you this way?")

I don't really want to discuss being hurt, but I will say that love is a tough business, so I've been hurt and have hurt others. Let's just say I disagree with the Modest Mouse lyric, "If life's not beautiful without the pain. Well, I'd just rather never-ever see beauty again." I think pain is good. It helps people to learn and grow. So we're clear (because of what is going on in the world right now) I'm talking about relationships and feelings, not war.

I've been very lucky to have lived such a good life thus far. I try to stay positive and positively affect those around me. I am so lucky to be with my wife, Amy, who is so lovely and kind; to have a loving and supportive family; to have such good friends; to teach students to whom I can give advice; and lastly to have such a good dog. To me, this story is a love letter to dogs, so I can't leave out *my* dog.

JC: *What do you think while you take walks, if you take them, or stare out the window, if you stare? What do you think while you're alone and have your mind to yourself?*

JB: So if I take walks, it's with Amy and my dog, Tali. Amy and I kind of just talk about our days. Tali doesn't talk at all. Anyway, I don't really think while I'm on a walk. I also don't really

stare out the window much. Maybe I'll see a squirrel and be like, "Hah, that's a cute squirrel. What If I chased it?" Fun fact: I remember, during post-college, some dude was talking shit about me to my girlfriend at the time, and he said he liked me, but that I was kind of like a golden retriever. Worst diss ever, I'm happy to be compared to a golden--

--Squirrel!--"

Anyway, I work a lot, so if I do get time to pause, I try to think of human situations that would be weird for robots. I'm working on a robot collection right now, so currently, that's my train of thought.

JC: *Your story has such a fine grounding in realism that it is almost impossible to not see the parts of science fiction that is permeated throughout. How do you reconcile absurdity with reality?*

JB: Hmm. Good question. Reality is absurd, though. I mean, billionaires are challenging each other to MMA fights. For this story, I recognized that the subject was completely absurd, but with any sci-fi or fantasy, realism must be deeply rooted. World-building 101 is all about what makes your world *ordinary*, and once that is established, you cannot change it in later acts. It will have your audience asking questions like, "Huh? What?"

Case in point: I remember when S7, E6 of Game of Thrones (the one where they capture the zombie beyond the wall) came out and people were discussing the travel time of dragons. One main argument was, "You are discussing dragons! It's not rooted in reality. Case closed, idiots!" I couldn't believe that this was a mainstream defense of the terrible writing and decision-making the show was soon to be known for. You can never allow your audience to be taken out of the moment by something illogical or contradictory to the established rules of the world. The rushed final two seasons were nothing short of a betrayal of their established world, which was once hailed for being a more realistic fantasy series. But I digress...

JC: *Lastly, and I always make my last questions ridiculous, would you rather be a butterfly or a moth? Alligator or a crocodile? Siberia or Antarctica?*

JB: Butterfly: They are more social. Gator: They are more chill. Siberia: It rolls off the tongue better.

Well, Jared, it's been a blast—short but a blast. I truly thank you for your time and your responses and your story. I think this is a special issue and I appreciate you contributing and allowing us to read your work and I am glad that you are a part of it.

Joey