

INTERVIEW ISSUE 12

{FICTION}

Fiction Editor Joey Cruse with Christopher Davis

Christopher Davis', "Finding Treasure" is something that I connected to because of a combination of nostalgia and some good goddamn writing. There is structure, humor, emotion, and an elation at having finished the complete cycle. There are stories that like to leave you in the middle, stories that like to leave you feeling miserable, and there are stories like Davis' that take you for the full gambit and leave you at peace. My questions may be garbage, but his answers won't be. They may be faux conversation, but he'll fill in the blanks. I have faith.

JC: How did racing come into your mind as a plot device in which Harvey's acceptance of his condition blossom? I enjoyed all of the irony of the fulcrum immensely.

CD: This was actually a driving plot device before the story even came into being. I don't know if there's really a "traditional" approach to the craft of fiction, in terms of planning out ideas, but if there is, I don't follow it. What I did have was two story elements (a character and a setting) that came together in a strange way, which is what I typically enjoy putting into my stories – weird stuff that sort of doesn't belong together. I wanted to write about a blind character because while riding the bus, I once observed a little kid struggling, in the innocent way that kids do, to understand a stranger's blindness. It made me consider the everyday complications of that experience, so that became my character. Once I'd landed on that, I knew I wanted to develop that character by putting him in the most sensory overload setting I possibly could. Thus, just about the loudest setting I've ever personally experienced – a dirt race track – sprung to mind, and those two elements pushed a story out.

JC: This story stuck out to me because of a small familiarity that I had through my family with Sprint Car racing in Knoxville, IA. Did you have much familiarity with racing before you wrote this story or did it require much research? If so, who was/is your favorite racer?

*CD: My dad actually raced Grand American Modifieds when I was a kid, so a lot of the details I included actually came from real life – I'm aware this is a "no no" (my apologies to the *Snobs of Fiction Association*). I don't have a favorite racer, but I always loved the musicality of the driver's names. That said, as a kid, I usually rooted for the car with the coolest paint job, or the one with a stuffed *Garfield* zip-tied to the back window. But I spent enough time at those races as a kid to not need to do much new research. I can close my eyes right now and hear the loud *THWUACK* of mud hitting the bleachers.*

JC: *There is a calmness and calculation within your writing that I feel is an important part of the craft of fiction. Obviously, there are times for experimentation and going gangbusters, but you've got a control of language here that is reflected and appreciated. Who are some writers you have read, want to read, would suggest, to anyone reading this story to read further?*

CD: This is a hard question for me, because I don't see myself as a real "fictionist," which is a word I just made up for the kinds of pretentious fiction readers and writers I've met, who read every author that's ever lived and understand every literary reference said authors make, no matter how obscure. I'm kind of on the other end of the stick – I read very little growing up (excepting the Harry Potter series, which I devoured for some unknown reason) and even less in high school, so I kind of skipped over the classics. It wasn't until I got into college and found that I enjoyed Creative Writing, that I started reading in earnest. I did a lot of "Best of [insert year here] Short-Stories" reading in my fiction classes, but I found those to be very hit-and-miss. Since leaving college, I've read back through the classics, and a number of other books that those fictionists would have balked out loud at. What I'm trying to get at with this longwinded, incoherent, and rambling response, is that while I've read and appreciated all of the *usual suspects* (Tobias Wolff, Joyce Carol Oates, Ray Carver, George Saunders, John Updike, Ron Carlson, and so on.), I don't know that I have favorites. My favorite tends to be whoever I've read most recently. I'm currently in the middle of *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen and *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson, the former of which I think has a great talent for creating engaging plotlines out of the mundane, and the latter of which has one of the most biting, yet un-intimidating writing styles I've read. The benefit of this randomness seems to be that there's a possibility I'm imbibing some useful techniques from various writers, but ultimately maintaining my own writing style. I think I can sum up my advice (which I can't believe anyone truly wants anymore this far into answering a simple question) in two words: read everything.

JC: *When you sit down to write, what is your process? I say that, by the way, as someone having one of the worst processes ever – splatter on a page and edit for two years before someone likes it.*

CD: I see your "bad" writing process and I'll raise you a worse one: I write until I hit a wall, and then I inevitably quit for months at a time trying to think myself through that wall. The problem is, walls are usually made of cement, and thoughts are wimpy little wisps of synapse-tinged oxygen (or more likely, carbon dioxide). If I'm inspired, I can write without stopping until I'm physically fatigued. But when I hit a wall, suddenly repotting the fern in the kitchen has never been more important, so it takes precedence over the stagnant story – anything to make an excuse for not getting back to it. I should clarify that these "walls" are not writer's block in the sense of *I'm sitting at my computer, but nothing will come!* My particular walls are more like, *my plot wrote me into a corner that I can't figure out how to successfully navigate out of!* I am admittedly a juvenile writer, so I'm sure this is incredibly obvious advice, but I did recently just discover a tactic that got me through a story that has been stagnant for over a year: just keep going. Granted, the busy-ness of life got in the way, so the story went to the back of my mind for a long while, but when I did want to come back to it, I couldn't figure out how I was going to get the characters to where they were going, both literally and metaphorically. My brain doesn't like to let me write unless I feel confident in the direction I'm going (I'm aware that's the dumbest-possible Achilles Heel a writer can have, so scoff and roll your eyes as needed), so I just left it in

the digital desert to die. One day this summer, I decided I was going to resuscitate it back to life no matter what it took, so I went back through and edited what I had up to the point where I stopped. When I got there, I wrote a few new paragraphs, hit a similar wall, and again, couldn't get past it. I spent a few weeks staring at it, trying to figure out how to proceed, and almost gave up once again. Instead, I decided to nuke the new paragraphs I'd added and try the same material, but from a different perspective. Surprisingly (to no one but me, I'm sure), it worked. I finished the story within a few weeks of that breakthrough. So that's my new method I use for when I hit a wall: try another approach to the same material, and hopefully it'll get you over the wall or out of the corner *just* enough that you can keep moving. That's not really a "process," per se, (I just used "per se" in a literary magazine interview about my writing; maybe I can still make the *Snobs of Fiction Association* after all!), but besides "I write words and then I revise said words," that's basically how it goes.

JC: *If you were a dinosaur, what kind would you be and why?*

CD: Is it bad that I spent more time thinking about this question than all of the others put together? Well, I *would* have liked my answer to be a "Plesiosaur," but a *Google* search just informed me of the world-shattering fact that apparently, they are not considered dinosaurs anymore, but are deemed "marine reptiles," so I've had to regroup. If we're judging by the amount of time I spent as a child stomping and snarling around my house as I reenacted the final scene from *Jurassic Park*, I would definitely be a Velociraptor, because they're not even afraid of the gigantic and terrifying Tyrannosaurus Rex. That said, as paleontologists (who apparently ruin everything) have, since that time, announced that Velociraptors were actually covered in feathers, some of their fierceness has been lost to me, so I have to try again. Unsure of what other options still exist (no pun intended), I just performed another quick *Google* search of the phrase "dinosaur list." In the twelfth position on that list is "chicken." I'm unsure if someone is simply unhappy working there or if chickens indeed fall under the category of Dinosaurs in these modern times, but I'm going with that: chicken.

JC: *Thank you, Chris, for an illuminating interview. All of us here at FOTD appreciate your participation and are honored by your presence in this issue.*