

nterview ssue 11 (Drama)

Drama Editor Janet Ehrlich Colson with Andrew Bennett

Welcome, Andrew and thanks upfront for participating! Let me begin this interview by saying an MFA does not guarantee better writers, although I wish it did as my student loans are bound to outlive my aspirations (not being morbid, just practical). I can see how firsthand how an MFA program might be criticized as a racket requiring the conferring of yet more degrees and titles leading to excesses of frustration and scant opportunities in employment other than on a pole or a respectable fast-food chain, what have you. We writers often find ourselves working jobs that others wouldn't – not for the money, but for the stories. At least that's my excuse. And by the way, an MFA doesn't promise tantalizing teaching chops, either. I've had incredible instructors with and without degrees as well as both decorated and undecorated duds. One of my best teachers was a homeless guy at Panera. I'm not trying to be cynical because I don't regret my MFA an iota. Whatever our paths, we all want to change the world with our narratives, right? My hope is that in my tenure at the magazine my play selection has represented playwrights from across the spectrum regardless of pedigrees or pedagogies, because their writing speaks for itself.

JEC: Andrew, the question that's been coming to me lately is "why plays"? Like why write plays at all? Who gives an f- about plays? Why should we care? What as a horror fiction writer attracted you to the form or how did the form find you? Okay, that's more than one question but that's where I'd like to start. I know you speak to some of this in your "The Playwright Speaks" blurb, but looking beyond The Harmony Project (and I foresee more forays into playwriting in your future), what do you think a play can do that other genres can't? I suppose you could speak to its limitations as well, or if you don't like the idea of limitations then what about challenges?

AB: Plays allow for a visual form of the medium of writing. It allows a writer to see the thing they wrote in their head come to life in front of them. Of course, there are writers who adapt novels into scripts for screen writing, but it's different than watching actors on a flat screen perform your creation; to watch someone perform something that you've mentally visualized is riveting.

We should care because this is the oldest form of live performance; from at least the Greek/Mycenaean cultures and if not possibly before. We should care because this is the truest

form of live performance of the Dramatic Arts. Not only does the writer have to be able to express their language, but to have the ability to work with a performer to create the scene the writer has seen in their head. I think I just answered multiple questions with this answer unintentionally.

The limitations in playwriting come in where a novel takes off. I can quick change scenes, morph a person into a meat person, tear a hole in the space-time continuum, have a ghost grow clown hair, or a million other things that just can't be done on a stage. Also, there is a limitation on description. Sure, you can pack a ton of description into a script. But look at Stephen King, he'll write three pages on a bike, seven pages on the description of a river, two pages on lighting, and so on (King descriptiveness is a whole other animal for a different day); you just can't do that in a play or your stage/set designers may kill you in your sleep.

On the last question, a playwright can take a novel and cut the chaff and pull the gems out to convert said hypothetical story into a working play. That is a challenge I like. I'd like to see more obscure novels turned into plays. But that's neither here nor there.

JEC: *Setting theatre (mostly) aside for a moment, can you talk about the kinds of things you love writing? Are they the same things you love reading or not necessarily? Speaking of influences (was I speaking of influences?) we often list the ones with the most name recognition. I mean, it makes sense for context and street cred, but I'm wondering if you could divulge some of your most obscure influences and how they've helped shape you.*

AB: I love creating. I love being able to twist words, to twist emotions, to play with language, and to make someone who's reading my work feel exactly the way I wanted them to. Not in a manipulative sense, but to allow someone into my head to see what I envisioned to feel what I felt when I thought of the idea or scene.

My obscure references are fairly obscure, I guess. I listen to Mike Doughty quite often. Doughty was the lead singer of a band called Soul Coughing that broke up in, I think, 2000. I found them shortly after that time, but I've followed Mike for years, and I've seen him in concert several times. I even have a poster of some of his lyrics on my wall.

In the writing sense, I've studied and have read a lot of Gothic literature for both my undergrad and some of graduate degrees. These few writers and their novels are semi-obscure—depending on the person in question, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Ontranto*, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, and Sheridan le Fanu's *Carmilla* have all been strong influences on my work. My more modern influences are: Matt Bell's novel *In the House Upon the Dirt Between the Lake and the Woods* is fantastic and symbolic in a way I don't have time to describe here. Lauren Beukes's novel *Broken Monsters*, is a modern gothic dark fantasy tale, I can only strive to write like Ms. Beukes, and—to keep this short, John Ajvide Lindquist, I know people think of *Let the Right One In*. but I'm a big fan of *Little Star* it's twisted in a beautiful way.

My movie inspiration is *Southland Tales*. Feel free to look up the trailer. I had someone at Goddard tell me she saw it while she was sick and thought it was a fever dream until she decided to Google it afterward. People that we talked to about it, didn't believe it was real.

JEC: *I realize there are lots of mixed feelings circulating around about higher education, hell, about education in general, but wondering if we could focus on the whole MFAW phenomenon for a second. Perhaps I'm fishing for an answer about the cross-pollination of genres and interdisciplinary connections a low residency space like Goddard provides whether or not you believe in educational institutions as monoliths, creative communities, not at all, or whatever –*

I think you could riff on some of these ideas. Who knows? Are we watching all of our former institutions go by the wayside? How much does it matter?

AB: Education matters. Does having an MFAW matter? Not necessarily. Do you need one to succeed? Absolutely not. Do I regret going to Goddard? Not at all. Goddard provided me with more skills and tools that, sure, I could have learned around a table in a writing group with a semi-established writer. I personally have read the book *MFA vs. NYC*. I have heard the arguments from both sides of the fence. Here's the way I look at it: if you want to teach, have a need for the skills and structure that an institute, or want to work directly with a specific writer that works at X college, and don't mind accruing debt or have a bunch of money and feel like spending it, go nuts kid. Do the damn thing.

Too many colleges—the business of learning is another debate in itself, have MFAW programs. I think there is something like twelve hundred MFAW programs in the US alone and more around the world. Not that I'm not all about having more writers out there going on to keep the traditions of writing alive and well, but I can't imagine all of these programs are necessarily above board or good for that matter. It's impossible. I think this is where some of the debate comes in. I also believe in the near future a lot of these programs are going to die off.

Writing matters. I don't care how you came about it. Carry the torch. Share the words. Create and destroy those words.

JEC: *On a more personal subject (unless it's too personal, then I apologize), do you have any experience with ghosts or the supernatural?*

AB: Not really. I'm kind of a null in that sense. I've worked in lots of old buildings that were purportedly haunted including a hotel that saw a lot of death and violence—including some while I worked out of there, and I've never seen nor heard anything. People I worked with said they saw or heard all kinds of thing and I never had any experiences I would note as supernatural. I grew up in PA where there are all kinds of Civil, French Indian, and Revolutionary War battlefields, forts, etc. I've had the hair on the back of my neck stick up here or there, but nothing of note. I've had a lot of Déjà vu over the years, but that's about it. I find

graveyards and cemeteries relaxing and peaceful. I don't really think any of the cryptids are real. If aliens are visiting, they aren't talking.

JEC: *Tell me what an ideal day of writing looks like for you!*

AB: Coffee, music, and a creative download. I like writing right away in the morning, I only give myself a brief reprieve before I get to work. If it gets screwed up by something, I have a hard time writing that day. I'm a weird creature of habit. I think when I have a specific space set up for writing it may be different, but my townhouse doesn't afford me the luxury of a set up writing space currently.

Anyway, when I'm on, I write like 2000 to 5000 words in a sitting. I feel like I'm exhausted after the latter number. But I also have a day job, so maybe that has something to do with it.

JEC: *What's your favorite beverage?*

AB: Maine Root Mexicane Cola, or coffee black and hot—I'm not fancy I don't care what brand. Adult beverage: Old Crow bourbon whiskey.

JEC: *Could you share one of your hot tips for getting through a pandemic?*

AB: Vaccines, masks, movies, handwashing, and thoughtful action.

JEC: *How about divulging a few of your favorite contingency plans?*

AB: I'm not sure, what the contingency is I'm preparing for in the context. But I'm currently working on one to help my writing. I'm studying for the Praxis test to hopefully move into teaching high school so I can focus on my writing more.

JEC: *What's your skin care routine?*

AB: Blood and viscera. I jest. I wash with whatever soap I want, that doesn't matter. I use a toner, a moisturizer, and eye cream. Mostly my wife has introduced me to this routine. Prior to this recent turn of events, it was nothing other than basic soap. Lye soap if my skin got terrible for some reason or another.

JEC: *Anything else?*

AB: To quote John Leguizamo in *The Pest*, "So long, my family, I must go to work. Love, peace, and chicken grease."

JEC: *Thanks, Andrew! Here's to a career above and beyond the apocalypse!*

Andrew Bennett's play '**The Harmony Project**' appears in this issue. (Plays # 1)

