On taking things slow



Author and editor Nathan Dragon discusses writing slow prose, forging his own creative path, and drawing inspiration from different artistic mediums.

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As told to Brittany Menjivar, 1717 words.

Tags: Writing, Collaboration, Process.

I would describe your book, *The Champ Is Here*, as a series of loosely linked anecdotes about life in a small town. I'm curious about how you conceptualize it—do you see it as a novel, prose poetry, a short story collection? Do those labels even matter to you?

I've always imagined it as a short story collection. I conceptualized it that way because that's how I was working on each piece, but I honestly don't know how much the labels matter to me. I can see, for sure, the question of prose poetry coming up, and I like that better than something like "flash fiction"; I don't like that term, for whatever reason. Maybe it's because of who I've been influenced by—that would be Diane Williams from *NOON*. I remember hearing her talk about labels and whether [very short works] should be called "pieces" or "fragments" or something; she was like, "Oh no, they're stories."

How did you arrange the different stories? Since there are some threads of continuity that run between them, was the order very apparent to you? Did you set out with an arc, or did you write the stories over a longer period of time and then go back and arrange them in a way that felt appropriate?

They were written over a period of almost 10 years, so the collection had a couple different iterations before this final version. I didn't [initially] set out to have an arc, but once I started putting the stories together, it became apparent that many of them had similar threads. I also have to give credit where credit's due: my wife Rae [Raegan Bird] is really good at sequencing things, so she helped with a lot of groupings. She used to be a photographer, and when I go back and read the stories and see how they sit with each other, they almost feel like they're sequenced like a photo book. Harris [Lahti], who helped edit the book, had some suggestions as well. It was all about finding the way the stories bounce off each other, because so many of them don't necessarily have the same distance when it comes to narration.

Would you say that the short stories have a shared narrator, or did you envision a different set of circumstances and characters in each one?

I would say that it's pretty close to being the same narrator. It's hard to say that it's purely the same throughout each of them because of the oscillation between first and third person, but I definitely imagine it being as close to the same as possible. And maybe that's just early influences and conception of self—this guy Galen Strawson wrote a book about how we keep track of things by means of narrations or episodes and how those play into self.

Many of the anecdotes in the book deal with everyday happenings, like seeing a woodpecker or going to the lobster pound. I was reading a past interview where you talked about appreciating the concept of slowness in prose. I'd love to hear more of your thoughts on that—do you have any advice for keeping readers involved in the story when the subject is relatively mundane?

I've always enjoyed art that feels slower. I used to love Kelly Reichardt's early movies, like *River of Grass*, and Jim Jarmusch's early movies. I loved how slowly they moved. Five or six years [after I first watched those films], I started reading that Norwegian guy Jon Fosse, and he talks a lot about how he thinks of his writing as slow prose. I began to conceptualize my paragraphs as frames in a film—[the story] could tick by slowly.

With all the references to local establishments and wildlife, *The Champ Is Here* has a very strong sense of place. You're based in Blacksburg, correct?

Yeah, I'm in Blacksburg right now.

I would love to hear about how living in a town that's on the smaller side has influenced your writing life, whether that's in terms of subject or your craft or your day-to-day practice.

There's not a lot to do in the same sense as being in a city. Places to go to in town are few and far between, so you're kind of forced to enjoy the wildlife or nature around you. Blacksburg definitely has changed how I work, but I don't think it has influenced much of the work in the book. There's maybe one or two stories where I was thinking about Blacksburg; I was thinking about a lot of other places that were also small towns.

Being here, I'm focused on getting up, sitting outside, walking through the woods with the dog, and writing and reading in the morning. [Life in a small town] forces you to write about interiority—there's so much less to do, so there's so much more time where I'm on my own, or it's just me and my wife, or just me and my dog.

Is there a local scene? Do you feel pressure to stay in touch with the scenes in the major cities, whether through social media or other means? How do you feel yourself engaging with the more social aspects of writing life?

I don't think a lot about the scenes when it comes to my own work, and I don't necessarily care to. And I don't mean this in any bad way. There's so many good things about a lot of the little scenes from all over the country, but it's also nice to not necessarily be lumped in with any of them. I just find people I like or share some interests with and become friends with them one way or another—through taking little trips to one of the cities and meeting them, or through sending each other nice notes.

[Being more involved in scenes] would make it a lot harder for me to work. I mean, I still get distracted if I go on the Blue Arrangements Twitter or the Cash 4 Gold one and things start popping up. I'll get nosy for a second, but then I'm like, "None of this implicates me."

I would love to ask you more about Blue Arrangements. I know that you and Rae do that together; I would love to hear what's it like working on a creative project with your wife.

It's awesome. She does most of the heavy lifting—I just want to say that. We started the project when we lived in Tucson, almost five years ago at this point. We didn't know anybody in Tucson, and we had this extra room, so we wanted to create a sort of residency. You'd come out and spend a few weeks working on something, whether it's visual art or writing, and then maybe we would put out a little artist book or a small collection. We had a couple of strange experiences with that, so it evolved into [Blue Arrangements'] online publication-slash-art show, *Lazy Susan*, and then a handful of printed books. It's really great because we have a lot of overlapping interests when it comes to our taste.

The title of the journal comes from a Silver Jews song. We launched Blue Arrangements two or three days after David Berman died; we were like, "Well, we were talking about it. Now's a good time because of what happened." She builds all the website stuff and does all the layout for the books, and we both take time to edit things as needed. It's all about collaboration. I think it also plays into the theme of slowness from earlier. We don't really have a schedule for things; we just start the next project when the time feels right. It keeps it fun rather than feeling like a business endeavor.

Through *Lazy Susan*, you feature visual and audio work in addition to poetry and prose. On that note, I would love to hear about what non-writing art has had the greatest influence on you.

At one point, the photographer William Eggleston said something that really stuck with me. Somebody asked him why he took photos, and he said he just wanted to write a novel. I liked that, and I liked thinking about the flip side of that—maybe I just write because I wish I could do visual art. I don't think that's actually true, but I do think about that flip side.

There's this really cool book, and I know this is sort of cheating because there's writing in it, called *House of Coates* by Alec Soth and Brad Zellar. They create this tension between fiction and nonfiction [through] photos of a small town in snowy Minnesota.

Do you dabble in any other forms of art yourself, or do you just appreciate them?

I used to take a lot of pictures when Rae and I lived in Chicago. It was easier to get film developed, and it was also way cheaper. I used to play bass in a couple of bands, as well. I still play music, but I just do it at home, poorly. Now it's mostly just writing.

In addition to running Blue Arrangements, you've been working as an editor for Cash 4 Gold. I'd love to hear how your experience as an editor has shaped the way that you write.

Seeing how many people are so good at putting something together has definitely shaped the way I write. This collection of stories took me 10 years. It's maybe on the smaller or sparser side, but I really appreciate concision. I've also been amped up to have a better work ethic—Jon [Lindsey], Harris, and I are friends, and we all help each other pick up slack when that's needed. It feels easier to see what I'm doing, too, and to not necessarily doubt my instincts and feel more solid in what I'm trying to do with my own work.

Nathan Dragon recommends:

"I Love You" by Jerry Jeff Walker

The Red Truck by Rudy Wilson

Sitting outside in the morning

Walking around wherever you live, no plans (I used to call it "bopping around")

Working with your hands

Name
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Vocation
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