On the value of solitude

Fiction writer Ben Marcus on corporate satires, complacent characters, and worrying less about how to categorize your work.

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In "Blueprints for St. Louis," Helen, the protagonist, observes that, "[…] there was no more fiction of dark days to come. The dark days were here, they were now." Would you say that the stories in this collection, *Notes from the Fog*, are about "dark days to come," or would you describe them as realism about the here and now?

I think that it's probably a combination. I don't really consciously set out to create some sort of dour situation, and I'm concerned about believability. So, while I sometimes think I'm inventing something a little into the future, what I end up doing is really trying to pull it back as much as I can, so it doesn't seem especially distanced from where we are now.

It would seem that we are on some kind of escalating path towards increasing calamity, but it also may be that anyone at any time generationally can kind of believe that. In a way, I think we sometimes flatter ourselves by thinking that we're living in the actual apocalypse because who would really want to live in a time that didn't feature some kind of great cataclysmic event. You're like, "Yeah, I lived when everything was just kind of fine, and then everything went to hell afterwards."

With your stories that are a little more speculative, like the "Grow Light Blues," did you set out to write about the future, or did you feel like the genesis of the idea was rooted in your observations about the present?

Honestly, neither. I don't consciously think I'm writing about something, but rather taking a character in a situation and maybe trying to put pressure on that character to add to some sort of extremity of circumstance. I'm not necessarily overtly trying to portray a period of time, so much as create a character and see if you can maybe care about him or her despite some kind of questionable actions on their part.

I want to ask about world-building, and if that's something that you think about consciously. How do you go about introducing readers to an unfamiliar setting without sounding like an anthropologist?

This is something that I think about. I think lately my tendency is to determinately not world-build. I feel like it opens up more questions than it answers. So I think what I've ended up being interested in exploring is a kind of world that is a little bit sealed off from inquiry, where things might be a little off, but you don't really know. And I don't think it's necessarily the job of the piece of writing to say exactly how everything works. Some people write that way. And sometimes if you read science fiction, there's quite a bit of effort to lay out the logic of the time and place and the technology. But what I've found is that I like the unease and the unsettled feeling that can arise from a landscape that is just a little bit off.

When I was writing my novel, *The Flame Alphabet*, in retrospect, I feel like I opened up too many cans of worms and felt this kind of narrative obligation to explain a lot, and didn't always know how to manage it. And so I retreated to some degree, but also tried to put a corset around the narrative world.

What I like best when I read is when you don't know much, but you also aren't annoyed by that. So you almost feel that you can't question it. You're at the mercy of the author, and you're not going to know, and you just have to wade into this world. Of course, Kafka is a great example of that. There's an Ishiguro story I really love called "The Village After Dark," which also seems vaguely otherworldly. But he's not going to tell you anything about it. You're really just getting that sense tonally, not through information. And I like that.

I'm interested in how you've used spoken language to build a world, especially a corporate world. So, aside from being very funny and true, what interested you in writing characters who speak in corporate jargon?

Maybe there's something a little easily lampoon-able about them. I don't know if you watch *Silicon Valley*, but it's a pretty big area of satire. I think these are people who have a lot of power over us, but then from certain angles can look foolish or naïve or strangely immature, even infantile. They're very open about the ways in which they would like to infiltrate our habits, our practices, and our lives. There's something really aggressive and militaristic about it, but it's softened. It just feels funny to me, and potentially really interesting. So yeah, it's an interesting cultural space, these kinds of conversations—at least what we can hear of them. I've wanted to get my hands on it a little bit.

I want to also ask more generally about the corporate settings in the book. How do you go about satirizing something that already feels like satire in the real world?

Well, yeah. Maybe you don't, right? Maybe you can't. In the end, I don't think I'm consciously writing satire so much as trying to write people. And what I'm interested in finally is just consciousness and what it feels like, moment-to-moment, to be a person in certain pressured situations. The pressure is needing money, needing to survive, needing to feel loved, needing to feel that life is possible and that life is worthwhile. The territory of our interior is so far still not freely available for all of us to consume. There are so many things that we now have such ready access to, but thoughts are still somehow impermeable, right? And the stories in some way touch on this a little bit. […] This time when we can still protect a little bit of our privacy is going to end. We'll either be seen with pity or envy.

I think of myself not as satirizing the corruption of corporation so much as hoping to reveal people in these situations, and see what stories are there, because I don't think I can, as you say, make fun of something that already seems so preposterous.

One of the things that interested me most about this collection was that it surveyed so many different emotional responses to large-scale catastrophes. Some of your characters had a hard time accepting the reality of their situation, while others turned inward or became complacent. How do you address something like complacency in your writing?

Maybe that comes from me sort of vacillating, and being interested in both engaging and hiding. I don't know how uncommon that is, because engaging can seem so futile. It can seem important and necessary, and then it can seem completely ineffectual.

I spend my summers with my family in Maine, in a very small town. When we're there, we love so much about it, but there is a funny way, maybe not so funny, that the news cycle is a little more distant. There's very slow or almost non-existent internet there, or we don't have a TV. Obviously, you can read the newspaper, but some of the people we're around, too, seem on a diet against calamity. There are times when that feels necessary and restorative, and other times when it feels kind of insane. I think, "How could we not be paying more attention to this crazy stuff?" Or I'll spend the morning reading a lot of news. And then I'll run into a bunch of people, and they just have no idea.

And so I guess I think about that a little bit, about the impulse I have to just read news all the time. I don't have regular TV at home. I just have internet streaming. So I often don't get to see TV news. Today I'm in a hotel. I'm in Los Angeles. I can't peel myself away from the news. I had a reading last night. I was like, "Fuck, I just kind of want to watch the news instead."

I think it's a real tension that most people probably have. That's why I thought it was interesting to see it reflected through your characters.

Yeah, yeah. But then to be personal, I think I often have untenable urges to hide and be alone. I have a family, and I love my children, and I love my wife, and I get so much out of that. It's not that I want to retreat from specific people, but I do that sometimes. I almost actively fantasize about the ultimate panic room, the ultimate hiding space, some kind of scene in the woods. For most of the writing I do, I go hide in the woods, where there are zero distractions and zero internet, and I write. I don't feel great about that. I think, "Why can't I just be in this really interesting insane world and write?" Because friends of mine do that. But I can't. I really require almost absurd solitude. So yeah, I guess it's a tension. It must be coming out when I'm writing.

Do you have advice for fiction writers who are struggling with the same tension, hiding versus engaging?

You can spend some time thinking about what you ought to do. But you may as well spend some time doing what you want to do artistically. I could write a certain way, and that could give me a lot of pleasure, and then I might publish some of it and everyone either hates it or ignores it. I think, "Okay, but I got something out of this myself." But I find maybe no one else did. Does that matter to me? How much does it matter to reach people?

When I was in grad school, there was a hostility towards even questions about the reader, pleasing the reader, writing for readers, all of that. And I think I internalized a lot of that. Not that I was out to actively annoy a reader. It just wasn't something I was too aware of.

Maybe this is just a long way of saying, if anything is going to make us stand out as writers, it's something that's unique to us—not our effort to join in or belong or be part of something that's already out there, but to try to figure out what our difference is, and to try to pay as much attention to that as we can, if there is even anything there. I think there's very little payback emotionally, artistically, or otherwise to actively trying to join an artistic world that's already well-represented. Also, maybe to try to face the consequences of that, because that could also lead to a fairly isolated artistic practice, too. On that same note, it's not necessarily an invitation to just write nonsense and say it's your own artistic vision.

If you're moved to write something, someone, somewhere might be compelled to read it.

Yeah, I guess that's right. I guess that's exactly right.

You teach writing, and you've also edited fiction anthologies. Would you say that there have been any recent changes in how your students approach storytelling? Is there a movement towards more surreal stories or more overtly political stories?

I do see more of the writers we might once have called realists taking on slightly fantastical strains, testing the waters with the uncanny, or something a little bit invented. When I was in school, the territories between what would be called realism and experimentalism, they felt a lot more discrete than they do now. I see writers openly and unselfconsciously blending those spaces.

And of course you see a lot of documentarian fiction coming out, after Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti. That stuff I think is like a wave after the W.G. Sebald wave, which was sort of doing that, too—writing in a more plainspoken, documentarian, faux-memoir voice, unadorned, not overtly stylized, even though I think all that stuff is, in a way, heavily stylized. So I see some of that, too.

I sometimes see students go through lots of changes in the few years out of the program as they're publishing their first books. They've moved all across the map in a writing program and then settled on something that might be a hybrid of some of those explorations, or might just be some kind of escalation of them.

What's the revision process like for you?

Well, I can't really work any miracles in revision, like some people can. I don't always advocate this to students, but I don't really have a problem just putting something aside. I don't actually throw it away, because I have the file, but just saying, "You know what, this is not savable. It's just not interesting to me." I'm not someone who can systematically chip away at something that's dead and make it better. I'll sometimes break things down into parts and think, "Well, this was a 25-page story and it's just really bad, but there's a page and a half here that I could sort of use in something one day." Revision for me is really only something I can get excited about if I can make something better.

I think with stories in particular, I write fairly slowly and do a lot of revising as I go. In other words, I won't really rush out a draft if I don't feel good about the opening or the middle. I will spend as long as I have to on the first paragraph, first page, the opening gambit, or whatever it is that I'm trying to get into place. I think I'm doing a lot of revision there. I'm really trying to make something that's then going to enable the rest of the story, and that takes a long time. And sometimes then the rest of the story might happen quickly.

Ben Marcus recommends:

Kafka
Silicon Valley
The Buried Giant by Kazuo Ishiguro
"The Village After Dark" by Kazuo Ishiguro
Jesse Ball
Mary Gaitskill

Name
Ben Marcus

Vocation
Writer



