

December 2, 2016 - Adam Fitzgerald is the author of 2013's *The Late Parade* and a founding director of The Home School in Hudson, New York. His new book of poems, *George Washington*, was chosen by the iconic American poet John Ashbery as one of 2016's best books. Of the book, Ashbery writes: "I enjoyed being clobbered by the nasty but nice Adam Fitzgerald in *George Washington*, his second collection of poems, which positions the reader in a panopticon surveying suburban America of the 1990s, as in 'Our Lady of South Dakota': 'Glam metal, nourish us. Roseanne reruns, comfort us. Prairie casinos, protect us.'"



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2175 words.

Tags: Writing, Poetry, Beginnings, Inspiration.

Adam Fitzgerald on what it means to write poetry in 2016

Why write poetry?

I remember writing poems in elementary school. I remember this one I wrote, which I just found recently. It's very weird and I must have written it when I was like eight or nine and I can remember showing it to the teacher and I guess she got very concerned and frazzled. Her face wrinkled into "Is something going on at home? What's wrong?" It was called something like, "Doors of Life," about how life is this infinite hallway of passing from room to room, but some people get trapped in certain rooms and don't get to pass through. I had to "consult" with the principal, a school psychologist, and our rather goofy counselor. My response was "I just wanted to write a poem." Not much has changed.

Your new book collects all kinds of cultural detritus—what it was like to grow up in the suburbs in the early '90s—and fuses it into a cohesive whole. Did you have an idea what this book might be from the very beginning? Or does that reveal itself to you only as the poems come together?

The thing about a first book is you kind of spend your whole life writing it, and then the next book takes just as long as it takes you. Poet-scholar Robert Polito calls this "six years for your first single, six months for your next one" syndrome. With this collection, I didn't really know where it was going to go until I gave a reading at West Point Military Academy, of all places. On the way back, the instructor who invited me there was complimenting my work, and encouraging me that the new poems were very cohesive, though I worried they were anything but. I didn't follow. She said, "You're creating this rather Americana landscape populated with lost fathers."

I've always been afraid of trying to know what I'm doing because I feel like if you calculate too much as an artist, if the chord changes become too palpable, you repeat yourself, stick with what you know, make it more about you than the poem. One poet calls this "What does the poem want?" Artists of every variety have to invent incentives to keep going. For me, in this book, it meant violating some of my pieties and principles of how I recognized my own habits. What made me "me" as a poet. So I tried to say, "I don't usually write poems with singular, explicit subject matter; I don't write poems that deal overtly with autobiography; I certainly don't write poems that try to look back at the world I came from (the ungodly suburbs of Olive Garden and Jiffy Lube)—but what if I did?" Turning the camera in or back on itself turned out to be as challenging as it was generative for me.

And by violating these habits, in a way, I was able to tackle my father's death in 2013, my family memories, and take inspiration from the geographical imaginary of New Jersey—its repressed forces, its daily plunk and plum.

It's a delicate balance of trying to get out of your own way and let whatever naturally should come out of you come out of you.

There's a way in which subject matter is like the experience of being in love while being closeted. You're unstoppably drawn in this specific direction, but you keep telling yourself it doesn't need to necessarily mean anything. You're always free to choose what you want, who to fuck. Obviously, there are endless outcomes for how people can repress or manifest what has microwaved their insides. Sometimes you learn how to get out of the way. Sometimes it just steam-rolls over you. You surrender.

This relates to my whiteness as well, in a way. Like most white people from where and when I came, my ethnicity and upbringing felt utterly uninteresting to me—being Irish-Italian Catholic, even my own last name Fitzgerald. They felt like fictional, artificial constructs. And more importantly, I thought they didn't have any bearing on my future. This from a person who wanted to be a priest, and who went to a Jesuit college historically created to help Irish middle-class aspirant families, many of whose closest friends are Irish. I've actually been to Ireland three times and Italy twice—all while seemingly never

"planning" to do so.

Poets—especially white poets—can romanticize this kind of myth of the blank slate. I certainly did. Writing about the worlds of my childhood and adolescence was a way to deconstruct and trouble that fat cow that is American self-reliance, the way in which it's profoundly structured my own process as a poet as well as self-image as an American.

Could you imagine writing a novel or doing something else entirely? What is it that makes poetry the form that works for you?

Every novelist I've ever met, I ask them, "How do you do it?" The stamina, the focus, the faith that you can unfold over hundreds of pages without a critical wrong move. Belinda McKeon told me, straight-faced, two things—one, you spend two years just drafting, working every day without internet (her husband would leave each day with the modem); two, sometimes you look back at what you've spent months doing and realize you have to get rid of 200 pages... 200 pages of time, effort, and slow progress! I am the antithesis of a marathon runner, so for me, the novelist is the marathoner on Everest, able to perform jumping jacks on the moon.

But I have no idea how to do it. I'll say though, most of my ideas revolve around updating the premise of people trapped on an island, even if it's not a literal one. I've always been so drawn to the phenomenon of castaways, cults, secret sects, lost worlds, underground communities. The way they create their own terrifying logic of being and belonging.

I'd like to write a sci-fi graphic novel. I'd like to do a memoir of and about my mental life. Hell, I even think a TV show would be incredible to try writing. That TV is so hot right now. Meanwhile, I work away and wait for poems.

What does it mean to be a poet in 2016?

We're actually living in the golden age of poetry. I shit you not. I think the range, diversity, ambition, scope, punch, and sheer experimentalism of options is everywhere. Poets are shaping the culture, also, in real time—Maggie Nelson, Claudia Rankine, Eileen Myles. These are not what we call safe, palatable poets. These are groundbreaking, iconoclastic, revolutionary artists. And while poetry is pronounced dead or hated or what have you, almost perennially in mainstream media and newspapers, in snoozy op-eds by old white men weepy for the days of Robert Frost, this incredible surge of new journals, new communities of activism and intervention, of squabbling and bar-raising is going on all around us.

The fact that a book like Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* has sold a half-million copies astounds me. I think readers are hungry for the urgency and training that a poet brings to fusing together the disparate puzzle pieces of our twisted mediated interior worlds. Today, so much of how people interact with information and entertainment is through text. The infusion of endless think pieces, copy, click bait, advertising—say what you will, but these are the domains that poetry as the research and development wing of language has a claim to best distill, undermine, propel, enliven. Poets are the people tasked with making love to language, to make it feel drunk, embodied, out of body. Increasingly, I think of social media as a form of poetry, not the other way around. Doesn't mean it's always *good* or *useful* or *worthwhile*, but since when were poems always that.

Finally, and this is perhaps most exciting to me, I think poetry is in this futuristic time zone where it's running like six seconds ahead of the rest of reality—sometimes it feels like even six months ahead. By which I mean, the conversations I've been hearing lately in the poetry community end up playing themselves out in the larger culture. Questions of appropriation and free speech, safe space and misogyny, racism and transphobia, the intersections of avant-gardism and identity politics, many absolutely distinct stances related to race and gender and sexuality—I find myself often seeing poets leading the way on troubling the waters, raising the big questions, and complicating the status quo. Don't get me wrong, poetry doesn't *need* to have its pulse on contemporary time, I'm all for the importance and pleasure in an A.E. Housman lyric. Truly, I say that without irony or an ax to grind. But what singer-songwriters were for the '60s, culture critics were for the '80s, I feel like poets are in the 21st century. They're having the crucial conversations first, it seems.

Recommended by Adam Fitzgerald:

The Service Porch - by Fred Moten

Times Square Red, Times Square Blue - by Samuel R. Delany

Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era - by Paul B. Preciado

The Book of Disquiet - by Fernando Pessoa

The Winter's Tale - by Shakespeare

With a new book out, what will the rest of this year be like for you?

I would like to read and travel as much as possible to support the book. I'm a poet. I'll sing for my supper. It's very important for me to want to share this book with readers in the flesh because it has a lot of shared vocabulary. I've been teaching for five years at various universities, and every semester I

have students introduce themselves by talking about the last good book they read, or a TV show they're obsessed with at the moment. They mostly mention pulpy, obvious fantasy sagas for examples of good books, and they don't feel compelled to comment or examine them, even, just almost check off a box that they too have read *Wolf Nights* or *Future Girl* or whatever the books are. And I have a soft spot for this type of reading because it's how I became a serious reader, in high school, binging through *Star Wars* novels before I read a single sentence that had a miracle of phrasing about it. So I understand. But when they go around the room and talk about TV shows? They all turn into Camille Paglias and Susan Sontags! They're ruthless, meticulous, highly analytical, and advanced—from the productions, plot arcs, allusions to past TV and dramatic renderings of this actress vs. that one. Isn't that marvelous? They turn me onto shows that I hadn't seen or heard about all the time. So I love that as a class we have this shared vocabulary of something creative we've all experienced and can analyze together. It's one of the things pop culture does best, makes consumers into immediate sympathetic intimates.

I was just watching a clip of *Jackass* with a friend. I don't even know why we were watching it. There was a scene where they're on these miniature motorcycles and are crashing through a supermarket. It wasn't even that funny but re-watching it I had this kind of Proustian explosion inside of me where I suddenly started thinking about *Supermarket Sweep*.

Do you remember that game show? The one set inside a grocery store where people are simply have a panic attack in hunt of five or six butterball turkeys? God, there were so many happily desolate afternoons in my childhood when *Supermarket Sweep* would come on and you just watch people lost their shit in this utterly fake, studio-created space. It's something I feel like I could go see as a performance piece in Chelsea right now. Thinking about that show felt strangely affirming to me. What I was after in this new book was trying to find those points where people have these relationships with different franchises or experiences that are planted really deep inside of us.

I read my "Oregon Trail" poem from the new book almost every reading—its language and phrasing lifted almost absolutely from the old computer game, with my admittedly perverted finesse added in. You should see people come up to me afterwards like I've been talking about one of their long lost relatives! They really have so much emotion invested in remembering these things and it's not just nostalgia. It's not about irony, pop, kitsch, or condescension. There's real passion and tenderness in their voice when they talk about these cultural tokens. These things are wrapped around all of our memories. And it's time to unwrap them.

Name

Adam Fitzgerald

Vocation

Poet

Fact

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