

Jim Shepard and the Fear of Human Weakness

Knopf recently published Jim Shepard's story collection, *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*, which has been nominated for the National Book Award. The stories explore masculinity in widely diverse settings and milieus—from the steamy high school football fields of Texas to the Chernobyl disaster to a nineteenth century Australian expedition gone terribly wrong. In fact, a lot of things go wrong in Shepard's fictional worlds, but perhaps that is not surprising. His beautifully chiseled prose feels charged with the same explosive energy that gives rise to abrupt tantrums or the sudden shifting of tectonic plates.

What most impresses me about Shepard's work is the way subtle changes in voice speak so clearly to character complexity and inner conflict—what he calls the braiding together of "self-indictment and self-exoneration." Shepard is the author of six novels (his most recent, *Project X*, amazes; purchase that book, too) and two previous story collections. He teaches in the MFA program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. As a teacher, Shepard specializes in close, insightful analyses of stories and novels. He's kind and generous and hilariously sarcastic, and I always feel lucky to be in his company. -Jay Ponteri

Loggerhead Reading Series: So much of your fiction deals with male brutality. In your novel *Project X*, Flake and Edwin are incessantly bullied by classmates, yet in your story, "Trample the Dead, Hurdle the Weak," you imagine the boys (Wainwright and Corey) whose central mission is to "cause panic on the [football] field one hundred percent of the time." One of the things I love about your work is how you have compassion for so many shades of masculinity. And yet what connects both bully and bullied is fear of human weakness. I wonder what continues to remain mysterious for you about boyhood and its counterparts of weakness and rising violence.

Jim Shepard: I think you're right. I think what connects both bully and bullied for me is the fear of human weakness. I'm also fascinated by the ways in which males, to generalize, act out their impulses and their aggressions on each others' bodies—it seems both compelling in and of itself and useful for something

like fiction, which needs to dramatize and make concrete human conflict. What continues to remain mysterious to me about boyhood or adolescence and its counterparts of predator and prey is the way boys are so superb at inhabiting both roles, sometimes simultaneously, and doing so while a) being aware they're doing so and b) being only partially formed as individuals, and so also aware that they're inadequate to the task of sorting through all of this. In other words, the way they feel they may have more responsibility than power or control—and the way they find themselves drawn into complicity with the more powerful. Those are all ideas I'm interested in, in general, and adolescent boys seem like a lucid way of throwing such issues into sharper relief.

LRS: I admire how *voice* in your work captures this mystery between awareness and confusion. In "Courtesy for Beginners" the adolescent narrator is full of self-hatred, and seems to recognize it, yet this partial awareness doesn't bring him any relief. The story places the narrator at a shabbily run summer camp full of boys drowning in what they cannot understand about themselves: loneliness, aberrant impulses, brutality. The voice so subtly displays the narrator's self-hatred. Here the narrator, whose father has just dropped him off, walks down to the counselors' lean-to where other boys hang around, bored and scared:

The fat kid had my glasses. Which was too bad for the fat kid. They were even fixed with electrical tape on the same side mine were. There was a whine in his voice that I could hear from up where I was, and he kept at it. *You fucking idiot*, I thought the whole time I was walking down to them. I was talking about me. I was always wanting myself to die whenever I found myself in a stupid situation. When I got to the front of the lean-to, I nodded at whoever caught my eye. Nobody nodded back. (165-66)

The voice seems purposely erratic, moving from the external detail to the narrator's self-deprecating mindset, then surprising the reader with a moment of self-knowledge ("I was always

wanting myself to die whenever I found myself in a stupid situation"), then back to a shaded perception that nobody sees him. Character complexity and dramatic conflict seem to arise out of voice. Can you talk about your trust in voice and in first-person narration in general?

Shepard: "Drowning in what they cannot understand about themselves" is a nice way of putting it. As is the notion of a "mystery between awareness and confusion." Both of those states are preoccupations of mine, which is probably why I write so often about males and adolescents. It also explains somewhat the more recent turn in my work towards the first person. I'm fascinated by how complicated our self-presentation can be: the way it can braid together self-indictment and self-exoneration in instances that are simultaneously unconscious and quite calculated, and how fluid a process that really is. That self-deception becomes a central way of being for most people, in varying degrees: some things we can't figure out, some things we have figured out, and some things we don't try to figure out. And all of those sorts of moment-by-moment changes that you track nicely above can be generated without a whole lot of conscious planning by the writer in the first person. That's part of what writers mean, I suppose, when they say things like, "The voice just took over."

LRS: What are some of the novels or short stories in first-person that have influenced you along the way?

Shepard: Jeez. Good question. I'm sure I'm going to forget a shitload. But off the top of my head: *Catcher in the Rye*, of course, and *A Clockwork Orange* and **Grendel** and **Memoirs of Hadrian**, among the novels; and in terms of short stories, **Barthelme's** "The School," Hannah's "Testimony of Pilot," Boyle's "We Are Norsemen," Joyce's "Araby" and Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" immediately come to mind.

LRS: You seek out voices in history and popular culture to explore brutality, guilt, and powerlessness (of the masculine variety). Your stories often showcase voices of historical figures:

Aeschylus, former Attorney General John Ashcroft, John Entwistle of The Who. Fiction writer Kevin McIlvoy refers to this as "trespassing"—that is, the writer imagining characters whose experience is largely different from that of the writer's (in setting, time, milieu). These stories stand apart from others such as "The Mortality of Parents" or "Courtesy for Beginners," which are made up of instances that seem closer to your own experience. In "The Zero Meter Diving Team" the narrator, a Russian engineer, recalls the **Chernobyl** Nuclear Plant disaster, exploring his guilt in relationship to his younger brothers' demise. What drew you to write about this particular historical event and to trespass with this particular voice?

Shepard: Kevin McIlvoy's term for it seems useful, though I'd also think that trespassing in that case occurs nearly all the time in fiction writing. Even when we're remembering ourselves as children we're trespassing in the sense of going somewhere and inhabiting a place where we don't fully, at least any longer, belong. I'm always attracted to those situations from history or myth that put human beings in memorable, and memorably difficult, situations and predicaments. And then it's a matter of interrogating my own emotional life for what it is about that situation that makes it so evocative for me. In the case of a story like "The Zero Meter Diving Team," then, the historical situation becomes a way of making vivid and concrete and urgent—and in the process, helping me work through—a series of related emotional concerns that do preoccupy me in my own life.

LRS: In relationship to "The Zero Meter Diving Team," how would you describe the emotional concerns of the story (or the narrator)? It seems like you're getting at the kind of guilt particular to that of an oldest brother, the way the narrator blazes a path for his younger brothers to follow—in this case, working at a nuclear facility that is designed, built, and run without care for human safety or dignity. Am I close here?

Shepard: Yeah, you're close, I'd say. I was interested in the way in which the country's mode of evading and trying to diffuse responsibility—as well as its way of just closing its eyes and wishing the whole problem would go away (a dilemma that has

some resonance for us today, to say the least)—plays out on the microcosmic level, too, within family dynamics. One resembles and helps illuminate—doesn't stand in for, but helps illuminate, both through its similarities and differences—the other.

LRS: I admire your dedication to the short story form—that is, the way you use the form (with its fast starts, tight dramatic focus, silences, careful image-and-metaphor construction, abrupt or shadowy endings) to deploy your various preoccupations. What keeps you coming back to the short story form? What does it offer you the novel does not?

Shepard: I admire the alacrity of the form, the dispatch with which everything needs to be approached and encountered—and the amount that has to be left unsaid. There's a lot that feels like furniture moving in novels. At least in mine. ❖