
Fiction as Fibbing: Benjamin Taylor



Benjamin Taylor is a writer in full control of the tools available to a practitioner of the language arts. His prose is elegant, his language intoxicating: the stories he tells are rich in detail, full of import, and of intricate disposition. His techniques have been assembled over a lifetime of reading: Nabokov, Bellow, Hemingway, Cather, Isherwood, Woolf. From these and others he has learned unconventional dialog, the trick of presenting action by catalog, the appropriation of history and science, psychology and religion, all of which he brings to bear in the creation of "fully fleshed and blooded" characters. It seems possible to descend from the "L" to a corner in Chicago and encounter Gabriel Geismar from Taylor's latest novel, "The Book of Getting Even," walking slowly past, musing over the material composition of the cosmos:

"It was simultaneously dawning on the three or four best cosmological minds: the multiverse, universes budding from one another, a profusion of universes without beginning or end, our own the merest upstart in the myriad. Universes without beginning or end — this bright idea, with its reintroduction of eternity, infinite regress and infinite progress, universes forever abounding, whispered to Gabriel that perhaps he hadn't come so far from Terpsichore Street after all since, soberly considered, he was only putting eternal Nature where the eternal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob used to be." (Pgs. 85-86)

One might even chance upon the magical puppeteer from "Tales Out of School" who, on one's way home in the afternoon, might approach with his spelling board and introduce himself:

"Old? He was older than old. With a neck as skinny as a cart shaft; and bug-eyes, signifying pathos; and nowhere the trace of a smile.

"Who are you, mister?" Felix asked at the corner of Post Office and Twelfth. He in particular, and Galveston in general, were interested to know.

The ancient of days said nothing, unbuckling his grip instead and taking from it a little board furnished with the letters of the alphabet. S-c-h-m-u-l-o-w-i-c-z, he spelled, pointing to each letter in turn. I—a-m—S-c-h-m-u-l-o-w-i-c-z." (Pgs. 121-122)

Taylor's characters are made for a particular time and place, but they embody what persists in human experience, regardless of context: the pain of youth, the pleasure of tenderness, the bewitching impulse to create. In this last he is as much a student as he is a teacher. Every sentence is expertly wrought, designed to wake the brain, combining, as the best writing does, meaning with music and artifice with import. From such language he builds authentic albeit imagined worlds wherein satisfying, sometimes painful, dramas unfold, proving that in contemporary literature one finds, even on a single page the artful, the imaginative, the credible and the fantastic.

— Carlin M. Wragg, Editor

Note: This transcript has been slightly modified to enhance readability.



Benjamin Taylor:[Reads *The Book of Getting Even*, Chapter One, pages 17-18.]

Carlin M. Wragg: One of the first things I wanted to ask you about is this idea of twins. Marghie and Danny aren't the only twins in this book. There are Gabriel's twin thumbs. There're also the twin cities of Buda and Pest, and I wondered, what was it that twins meant to you as you were coming up with these characters?

BT: You're telling me things about my book I hadn't noticed! I think if you're going to use such a device effectively you'd better not be conscious of it, and I wasn't until just now. I think Gabriel has an imaginary friend who turns out to be his identical twin; at least in fantasy, he realizes that, so that's another one. Well, rather than answering I'll tell you my little theory about fiction, which is that it's a way of knowing without knowing everything about what you're doing. And if you did you'd be your own critic, which is a poor idea.

No matter how gifted you are as a critic, I'm not very, but I remember an interview where **JOHN UPDIKE**, who's very, very highly developed as a critic, maybe the greatest book reviewer in American history, says that when he's writing fiction that part of himself is simply turned off. He does not stand over his own shoulder saying, "Why did you do that? That's not quite right. That's a false note. That's a fool's errand you've gone on." None of that. And, as I say, I think you pay for whatever it is you find out in the course of writing a novel by not finding out so much else, by not realizing everything. It really is a way of knowing without knowing all.

CMW: So in terms of coming up with the concept, it sounds like you have to know enough of what you're doing to create a novel with a narrative arc and characters, and then you have to suspend that critic, suspend that part of yourself.

BT: Yes. I do believe a novel needs a theme, an inner subject, the thing that's underneath all the words. Theme is what we were taught to call it in school. I like the term "inner subject." But that's not very reliably what you begin with, that's what

you discover in the course of the work. What you begin with — well, I can only speak for myself — with *Tales Out of School* I began with an image: a woman washing another woman in a great big basin by moonlight. That's what I began with. But it's the very last thing in the book. And to

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find out everything I could that was implicit in that image was my method. Then I wrote a first sentence, which I knew had nothing to do immediately with those two women: "That was the house where the Jews lived." Then at the end of that journey there they are, the two women. So that's how that began.

BT: *The Book of Getting Even* began with, again, an image, and the image this time was of a middle-aged woman and an elderly man holding hands, crying, walking along the street, with the sun shining and snow coming down. Maybe because I've always been fascinated by something we saw a lot of where I grew up in Texas, the sun shining and rain, but I never saw the sun shine and snow come down until one day when I was in my thirties, and it stayed with me as something uncanny. And somehow that got joined up to the image of an old married couple busy crying, looking neither right nor left, just crying. To explore all around that image for everything I could make of it was my job for a period of a few years, writing this very little book, as it turned out. But that was how the imagining began.

CMW: I wanted to ask you about that since you mention it: the economy of language. I think you have an amazing ear for language. I saw this in *Tales Out of School* and then when I moved on to *The Book of Getting Even* where it's even more developed. It seems like there's a kind of "twinning," if you will, of paying attention to making the language really precise and really speak and sing, and the fact that neither book is a

big tome, they're very elegant and small. How did you develop that voice and what do you think about language as the tool you use?

BT: When I wrote *Tales Out of School* I felt licensed by the 1907 setting and the nineteenth-century backgrounds to use a slightly archaized, peculiar baroque kind of language. I knew I needed a different style for *The Book of Getting Even*, which begins not in

1907 but in 1970. Those are my own times, my own youth and coming of age. And yet I still wanted something that had a

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rarefaction to it, as if the language had been purged. I'm attracted to opposite kinds of writers. I'm attracted to **NABOKOV**, who seems to have wanted to touch every single word in his unabridged OED before going. On the other hand, I'm attracted to **HEMINGWAY**, whose aesthetic was based on the opposite, a purging away of almost all of the language. So this was my schizoid situation and the books are the result of that. They're little, chiseled, but somehow baroque stories.

BT: I never went to writing school. I never was in a workshop until some years ago when I conducted one for the first time, so I never had people badgering me, saying, "You can't do that. Things like this don't happen. What's her motive? People don't really talk like that. This sounds affected. Who do you think you are?" No, I never heard any of that because I wrote *Tales Out of School* in isolation and the only readers I had were people as peculiar as myself and with taste as old-fashioned. I was very, very deeply under the spell of certain American writers when I wrote that: **WILLA CATHER**, **KATHERINE ANNE PORTER**, aspects of **EUDORA WELTY**, **JEAN STAFFORD**. And then I was also discovering my taste for other writers: **BELLOW**, who's become very important in my reading. And I remember reading, when it first came out,

Marilynne Robinson's first novel, **HOUSEKEEPING** and I thought to myself... I didn't exactly say, "I could do that," I thought, "I could do something in my own line like that," and those would be the dimensions of it, and it would be something that was apart from the mainstream. That would be my aim: not to get in the swim, but to stay out of it.

CMW: What was it about that novel structurally, or in terms of language or story, that got you?

BT: Oh, the marvelous language. What I loved about *Housekeeping* was that the language is gorgeous, fascinating, the language is a protagonist of its own, yet you finish that book knowing you've been in the presence of fully

fleshed and blooded characters. It's not a work of aestheticism; it belongs to the moral tradition of the novel. So that had quite an impact on me. A novel by Jean Stafford called **THE**

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MOUNTAIN LION

had a tremendous impact on me. I guess I realized that, like most writers, I had a need to write about the momentousness of youth — the quick of youth, when everything seems to last much longer and be much more dramatic, and the young people are in the grip of the delusion that these momentous things have never happened to anyone before. So a fourteen-year-old, going to be fifteen, in *Tales Out of School*, that's a summer book, and then *The Book of Getting Even*, which is, I think, the same number of words, lasts ten years. I was worried about that, that it would seem spotty or thin, but then I read a short story by **ALICE MUNRO** that takes place over the course of 130 years and at that point I realized that you can do whatever you want.

CMW: That's really interesting what you say about time in a book, that there is no reason that a book has to span twenty years, or even one...

BT: Or one day. Think of the great "one-day novels" like *MRS. DALLOWAY* and *ULYSSES* and there's a wonderful novel by Christopher Isherwood called *A SINGLE MAN*. And then there's a novel by William Golding if I remember it right — William Golding, that famous and underrated writer — it's called *PINCHER MARTIN*, and it takes place just in the very last moments of a man's life. Not in a day but just in a few dying moments.

CMW: Is that something you might bring into future work?

That idea of the one day, or the even more abbreviated novel?

BT: I think you need real art for that. I think

that's a very unforgiving proposition. Isherwood brings it off beautifully, Virginia Woolf beyond praise, Joyce... But I am very interested in metamorphosis, which is one of the themes in *The Book of Getting Even*, and if you want to do that in a one-day novel, then you need immense back story and flashbacks, and all of it very unobtrusively handled.

CMW: I wanted to ask you about the South as a setting, which plays a role in both of these books. In *Tales Out of School* it's the central setting and in *The Book of Getting Even* it's the opening but not the concluding setting. What is the South to you? Why does it come into the writing?

BT: Well, that was all I knew when I was a child. My mother's people came from Shreveport, Louisiana, where my great grandparents and grandparents on that side settled.

My father's people came from Tyler, Texas, which is just across the border. So my background was Southern, not Southwestern. I didn't know

anything about cowboys or Hopi Indians, I knew the South. It was quite an insulated and protected childhood in which I had to find out about the larger world pretty much on my own. And that's the case with both these protagonists.

CMW: Maybe you can talk a little about the character of Gabriel and his background. He comes from New Orleans, as we heard you read, and he's the son of a rabbi.

BT: The son of a reformed rabbi, right, which I am not. No, I took to writing fiction because I like making things up. I should say, in the interest of full disclosure, that I have never known any family remotely like the Hunderts. I have known a family a good deal like the Dunallens, and I've known a family in some ways like the Geismars. It's about fifty percent based on certain things I know from real life, and about fifty percent made up out of nothing, just out of daydreaming. I think that's the way it should be. This is not memoir, this is not autobiography, this is not confession. It's fibbing. It's making things up.

CMW: So, fibbing. To think about fibbing for a moment, the character

Gabriel is going to be in the sciences. He mentions in that passage you read that he doesn't think that the humanities are for the strong-minded...

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BT: Yes. Look, I was a disaster in arithmetic, to say nothing of the higher mathematics. I was bewildered, lost and often on the verge of tears in science classes. None of that was remotely my calling. I thought my way in, and without the help of too many scientific friends, a few, I thought my way into what that other life would feel like. To my mind, the job of fiction is not to explain — that's what

essayists do that's what nonfiction writers do — but to embody, and in particular, to embody those moments in a life in which some operation of fate or destiny becomes apparent and the people involved are never going to be the same again.

CMW: This would be a great moment to read a section from *Tales Out of School*. A character that I just loved in this book is Schmulowicz, and one of the reasons I'm making a connection is because of what you said about those moments in a life when you know things will never be the same. In *Tales Out of School* one of those moments comes with the acceptance of Schmulowicz as a long-term guest of Miss Murph and Miss Truley. Can you read a little of that passage?

BT: If I remember, Felix, fourteen-year-old Felix, has met a mysterious stranger in town and brought him around to the home of Miss Etta Murph and Miss Velma Truley. Miss Murph is his tutor and Miss Truley is her companion. Miss Murph has proposed that they give their boathouse out at Offitt's Bayou to this stranger about whom they know nothing.



BT: [Reads *Tales Out of School*, Chapter Nine, pages 150-154]

CMW: Where did this idea come from? It's so magical and wonderful.

BT: The astounding puppet theater is the only thing in that book I didn't make up. My great friend of childhood, Robert Anton, who's been dead now for twenty-four years, imagined into being and made such a puppet theater, made every single puppet from scratch. And they did have this quality. I think he must have been the greatest puppeteer the world has ever known. I've written about him elsewhere too.

BT: After his death I wanted to make some kind of tribute to him that would take the form of fiction. I thought he was just passing through life and that is what Schmulowicz is doing. I thought that this dear friend of mine, my first friend, had mysterious clouds of glory, as if he were trailing them and had come from somewhere else entirely.

Schmulowicz has an exoteric identity, which is that he's an immigrant without papers who's slipped onto a ship and evaded the immigration authorities at the Port of Galveston. And he has an esoteric identity too that the book reveals: that he is, if you're

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willing to believe it, the prophet Elijah, who's always dropping in, dropping out of eternity and into time just to see what's going on, or to do some good office. That Jewish legend, or tradition, appealed to me. The tradition of Eliyahu HaNabi, Elijah the Prophet, who never died, who keeps coming back. You might have met him without knowing it. I think I was dealing with the first tremendous grief of my life, and this was my way of coping with it.

CMW: Another transformative moment comes in *The Book of Getting Even*, when Gabriel arrives in New York with Danny and Marghie to meet their parents, who will become a central part of his life. Can you read a little from the passage that describes that arrival?



BT: [Reads *The Book of Getting Even*, Chapter One, pages 29-31.]

CMW: There's a lot going on in this passage and there's a lot that leads on to later stages of the novel, but one thing I noticed is a technique that you use: the making of lists. I wonder what you think lists do as a technique in writing and what they allowed you to do in this book.

BT: Well a catalog has to — if it's going to be dramatic — it has to have surprises in it, it has to key up interest in a progressive way, and it has to register as truthful. The great master of catalogs was **WALT WHITMAN**. His poetry is really based, long stretches of it, on cataloging. I guess I got some of it from there. But catalogs are also an

occasion for comedy because of the unexpected juxtapositions. I don't think that list of places along Central Park South qualifies as a good catalog, but there are some good ones in *The Book of Getting Even*.

CMW: You said the Hunderts are purely fancy.

BT: They are. I made them up out of nothing. I just imagined... Having read biographies of **LEO SZILARD** and **EDWARD TELLER** and **JOHN VON NEUMANN** and all the rest of that cohort, I began to think, "Oh, well I can invent one more who's not any of those!" He's not meant to be Szilard and he's not meant to be von Neumann, and he's certainly not meant to be Teller, but people used to speak about the Budapest Miracle, the Budapest Seven, and I thought, "Well why not the Budapest Eight? I'll just add an authentic sounding name to this list: Gregor Hundert, called Grisha." And that's how that happened. I suppose Lilo and Grisha were people I would have longed to meet.

BT: See, this is bookish. It comes not out of an experience I had in life, but in literature. It comes out of those books that are about falling in love with a family very different from your own.

BRIDESHEAD REVISITED is behind this. *THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS* is behind this. My fascination as a boy with the **GLASS FAMILY** in Salinger's work

- the lure of a family that you imagine to be all *luxe, calme et volupté*.

Youth is the season for falling in love with other families. It happens. But if

it happens to you in middle age then you've failed to develop. The hook in is usually erotic. There's an element of snobbism too, rejection of where you come from, thinking, "Ah, here are my real and rightful origins; here's my real and rightful tribe." It's a kind of story that I suppose you read one way if you're young, and another way if you're

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middle aged. But by the end Gabriel has figured out that this thing that Freud called "**FAMILY ROMANCE**" is a cul-de-sac, it has its dénouement. And then you're back to your own real origins, not your elective but your biological ones.

CMW: Danny's character evolves and he becomes very — the word might be concerned — with American action in Vietnam. It overtakes his life, and the character that we got to know in the beginning of the book is really changed by the end because of this.

BT: Oh yes, he's taken a vow of silence. This isn't something I made up, it's a story I heard from **YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA**. There was a half-black, half-Orthodox Jewish poet in San Francisco named **BOB KAUFMAN**, and he protested the Vietnam War by silence. That stayed with me and I just had to use it. That's how it got into my book. But Bob Kaufman apparently did not lose his mind; he produced a lot of poetry out of this silence.

Danny's silence, unfortunately, produces something else. You're not old enough, Carlin, to remember the **VIETNAM WAR** but you've lived through another disaster of foreign policy and you know how angry people are now. Raise it by a couple of factors and you have the atmosphere of the Sixties and the culmination of the Sixties which was the Seventies.

The worst political lunatics of that decade, amateurs like the **SYMBIONESE LIBERATION ARMY** in America, and professionals like **BADDER- MEINHOF**, **THE RED BRIGADES** in Europe, all of these terrorist actions, these terrorist groups — they're extinct now — but all those groups in all those countries came into being because of the Vietnam War, because of the abomination of the Vietnam War.

So this was a not-at-all mysterious extreme of anger that I'm representing in the book. There's an interview with **PHILIP ROTH** in which he says, "I wrote *Portnoy's Complaint* because I wanted to answer the obscenity of the War with a little obscenity of my own." A lot of people wanted to answer the outrage with some outrage of their own. That's what Danny's doing.

CMW: And for you as a writer working in this time, were you thinking about our current historical moment as you were preparing the book and it was coming out?

BT: I was not. Because I didn't want the book to be a parable or an allegory. That's not my interest. I really wanted the book be about those times, not these. So I leave that to others to make the analogy. I guess it's inevitable. But it's not what I was thinking about.

Benjamin Taylor is the author of a book of essays, "Into the Open," and a novel, "Tales Out of School," winner of the Harold Ribalow Prize.

This year Steerforth Press has reissued "Tales Out of School" in paperback and brought out Taylor's new novel, "The Book of Getting Even," a Barnes & Noble Discover Selection. The paperback edition is scheduled for May of 2009.

In the autumn of 2010 Penguin will publish "The Letters of Saul Bellow," edited by Taylor. "Naples Declared," a travel memoir, also from Penguin, is scheduled for spring, 2011, along with Mondadori's Spanish edition of "The Book of Getting Even."

To download the podcast of this interview and to read additional information about Mr. Taylor, go to www.openlooppress.org