

Jason Ockert

INTERVIEW



Jason Ockert has won several national fiction awards and is the author of the short story collection *Rabbit Punches*. His stories have appeared in many journals, including *The Oxford American*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and *McSweeney's*. His work is included in the 2007 anthologies *New Stories from the South* and *Best American Mystery Stories*. He teaches in the English Department of Coastal Carolina University.

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Doug Moon: How do you see a community of writers working, both in academia and as a published writer? How does that formulate where your stories go from inception to publishing?

Jason Ockert: The stories from *Rabbit Punches* were largely shaped by the aid of peers in my graduate workshop, I'm grateful to say. What can be helpful in the classroom community is learning how to tune your individual voice by process of elimination. A workshop can make a writer schizophrenic. One's head may become infested with competing opinions. One thing you can learn from an academic environment is how to parse through other people's visions of stories in order to clarify your own. When the story reads right to me I send it out and hope for the best.

As far as the post-classroom community, I've attended conferences, given readings, served on panels, and corresponded electronically with other writers and readers. These interactions can be a mixed bag and I prefer conversations that focus on the work and less on the business of publishing. It's natural to network, of course, but that can get old quick. I'd rather argue about

the genius of Barry Hannah over a beer than compare agents in a dimly-lit conference ballroom.

Brooke Hardy: I can tell that what you've written is very character-driven. These characters are so full of quirks and desires—pretty much everything you would want in a really strong character, they just happen to be really odd. Something about your stories reminded me of a combination of Geek Love, without the physical abnormalities, and a Flannery O'Connor story. I was wondering what you see as the function of these really odd characters in your stories?

JO: One hurdle in creating these characters was to make them three-dimensional. The oddities are meant to be a characteristic, not the entirety of the character. These odd folks feel familiar. Flannery O'Connor was my first literary heroine, so it makes sense that you can see the influence. Like her, I don't want the characters to come across as simpletons. The quirks need to be earned. The idea is to avoid creating a caricature. You don't want to share a joke with the reader at the expense of the character. Without compassion for characters the

reader will lose faith in your story.

BH: Do you know any of these people?

JO: Do any of these characters come out of a space in reality?

BH: Sure.

JO: I'm sure that they do. Take "Deviated Septum," for instance. I've been working since I was twelve at a variety of different places. The job is a great place to observe people. I have always been curious about the ways in which people live. One of the things I used to do was deliver medication to the elderly in South Florida. My job was to go door to door and drop off the medicine. That part of "Deviated Septum" comes from reality. I was fifteen or sixteen and what I remember was that these old folks really wanted me to come in and talk. Many of them were just very lonely; many had been abandoned by their families. "Deviated Septum" didn't simply come from that experience, however. Much later, when I was just starting graduate school, I rented a room in an elderly woman's house. She was this free-spirited old radical who rented the room in order to have some

companionship. She wanted someone to listen to her, really. One time she told me how unfair life was because, as you age, your body may fall apart but your passion does not go away. She said all this in a very convincing way; no guile at all. And that loneliness and sadness resonated. It reminded me of my job in South Florida. So, I took those feelings and combined them with the sexual awkwardness of a sixteen year-old boy and created the story.

BH: In some of the stories, you're caught between wanting to laugh at how absurd it is, but then there's that hint of sadness to it. Like "Deviated Septum," he's trying to be suave and debonair, putting the wrappers on the bed. You want to laugh because this is crazy, but then you realize that there's serious desire underneath this one character. He's trying to do something—not in an underhanded way—and then you have this woman who's dying as he tries to revive her. I thought it was interesting. I like the images and how it shifted there and the progressions in the stories.

JO: Thank you. I think that's where it comes from. You take characters, put them in situations, and then try to figure out where you want to go and what you want to convey. I am to be honest with the pursuit.

DM: It seems like some of the most fun I have with reading contemporary short stories these days are the ones that really do flirt with the sense of the absurd, not only in modern life, but life in general. Thinking about so many of these experiences coming from the working world, which is probably the best place to cultivate a unique sense of the absurd, I wonder how you see that working. To what extent would you describe your stories as an extrapolation of what the world is like? To what extent do you feel like the

fun is in that sort of hyperbole?

JO: *Rabbit Punches* is a collection where you've got characters that are desperate to fit into something. They're on the outskirts, on the cusp of being just forgotten and remaining anonymous. Most of what they're trying to do is belong, whether as part of a family or part of a community or part of a corporation; something bigger than the self. This doesn't come easily or naturally to most of the characters. So, the fringe of being cast out was something that I was curious about in this collection. It's about trying to belong and the consequences of being a part of something, after all.

BH: I would say that your stories are definitely tied to a sense of place, not only geographically, but also environmentally. Do you see this sense of place, even geographically, as being central to these stories? Can you imagine, say "Deviated Septum," happening in another location, or do you feel that it's really tied to this Southern town?

JO: For me, place is very important. I had geography in mind when I was compiling the stories. Essentially, the movement is from the Midwest to the South and then back to the Midwest. There's contrast in the mood from the first story to the last story and this is tied to place, also. You could say that the "Southern" stories have more hope and possibility and opportunity for mischief while the "Midwestern" stories contain more reflection and contemplation and resolve. That's how I see it, anyway.

BH: Some of the stories are rather long and some of them are only a few pages. I was interested, not necessarily in the specifics of those stories, but how, when you're in the writing process, you decide, "Okay, this is where I need to stop the

story," or whether you continue the narrative and add more?

JO: I just finished a novel and a second collection of short stories. In that second collection, *Neighbors of Nothing*, the stories are much longer probably because I had been working on the novel for so long. My brain was more accustomed to the extensive narrative. In *Rabbit Punches*, I did just the opposite—I started with the short-short stories that were more language-driven and personal and then started building. It's difficult for me to say when I consciously know when to stop a story. The most honest answer is to say that I stop it when it feels right.

DM: Why do you think more readers seem to prefer novels to short fiction?

JO: A lot of times novels are more plot-driven. When someone asks you, "Well, what's that novel about?" you can answer. But, with a story, if you can answer what the short story is about, in some ways you aren't really doing justice to the piece. You have to read it. Sentences matter much in the short form. In a novel, often, the emphasis is placed on the event rather than the discourse and this might be more accessible to readers? I don't know, though. I don't want to sound bitter because I actually think that the short story form is alive and well. People are reading them. I have faith.

DM: Are there any journals or writers that you've read lately that you admire?

JO: Yeah, there are. *Oxford American* is one of my favorite short story journals. They do some really good things. They are always putting something out that I find I read cover-to-cover.

DM: They have great music issues,

too.

JO: Yeah, they do that, and they put the movie issues out. They're damned good. I'd also recommend *Ecotone*, *Witness*, *The Iowa Review*, and, of course, the online journal where I'm fiction editor, *Waccamaw*.

As for books, Padgett Powell has a relatively-recent novel out called *The Interrogative Mood*. It's 164 pages of questions. One question after the next, after the next. I recommend reading it. It's wild and heart-rending. As far as collections of stories, to name a few I recommend *Tunneling to the Center of the Earth*, by Kevin Wilson, *The Taste of Penny*, by Jeff Parker, *What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us*, by Laura van den Berg, and *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*, by Wells Tower.

I am drawn to stories that have a level of innocence to them. I appreciate writers who are forthright with their characters even as they situate them in ridiculous circumstances. I am curious why characters get back up (when they probably shouldn't) and nothing makes me happier than rooting for the underdog in a piece of fiction. I want the story to save me, too.

I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me here.