

AN INFORMED IMAGINATION:
JIM SHEPARD ON HELPLESSNESS, EMOTIONAL
DILEMMAS, AND THE LOCH NESS MONSTER

Jim Shepard is the author of six novels, including most recently *Project X* (Knopf, 2004), and four short story collections, including most recently *You Think That's Bad* (Knopf, 2011). His third collection, *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*, was a finalist for the National Book Award and won The Story Prize. His short stories have appeared in such publications as *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and have been anthologized in *Best American Short Stories* and *The Pushcart Prize*. Regarded as a "writer's writer," Jim is celebrated for an uncanny sense of empathy for his wide range of characters, from high school football players to WWII Czech freedom fighters to the Creature from the Black Lagoon, as well as his ability to create imaginative settings that inhabit time periods and locations far from one we call our own. To read a Jim Shepard story is to undertake time travel, making quantum leaps from body to body, all the while gaining a greater understanding of the human condition in the world from which you came.

The following interview took place over email in early 2013.

J.W. Wang: My favorites stories of yours deal with doomed expeditions that illustrate just how powerless human beings are when confronted with nature (a giant shark, Yeti, a searing desert, frozen tundra, etc.) or an otherwise overwhelming force (evading the SS, flying rocket planes that explode). What is it about these ill-prepared follies that particularly attracts you as a writer?

Jim Shepard: I think that feeling of helplessness-that-needs-to-be-resisted is a commonplace feeling in our world, if one is to imagine any sort of meaningful political action at all, and so I like to try and re-imagine and recreate its contours. I also just find horrible things that are awe-inspiringly powerful cool and compelling things to write about, in a ten year-old boy kind of way.

JW: Your earlier collections featured a few stories that experimented with more surreal/postmodern features, such as “Ida” and “Alicia and Emmett with the 17th Lancers at Balaclava,” while your later collections are more grounded in traditional first person narratives. Do you see this as part of your evolution as a writer?

JS: I do. It’s as if with the earlier stories I was teaching myself how to give myself permission to go outside of my own experiences, I think. I’m a little bolder about that now, and a little more aware of the hubris of *any* kind of writing.

JW: Writers and writing teachers often encourage students to forego graduate school in favor of worldly experience. Go live on the streets of New York, they say. Go teach English in Thailand, work on a salmon boat in Alaska. You are, on the other hand, someone who has never left the academic environment (as far as I can tell), and yet you’re able to create these rich, resonant stories set across myriad locations and time periods. How do you do it? Or, how is that possible?

JS: Oh, I’ve been outside the academic environment, all right, and in fact, have had some staggeringly shitty jobs. But I don’t believe in the romantic notion that you have to have experienced Adventure before you can write Great Fiction. Homer didn’t fight in the Trojan War, and Stephen Crane didn’t fight in the Civil War. Flannery O’Connor didn’t get out a lot at all. It’s about the careful observation of the world, and

about never ceasing to try to learn about how the world, and people, operate, and about exercising one's imagination.

JW: What would *your* recommendation be, to a writing student just starting out?

JS: Read as much as you can and observe what's going on around you with as much intensity of concentration as you can.

JW: I tell my students you may spend up to eight months doing research for a single story, and that daunts the bejeezus out of them. When do you decide you'll make something up, and when do you decide you need to find out more details about what it's like to sleep in the crew's quarters of an early nineteenth-century bomb vessel?

JS: I start writing when I feel I have enough material in hand to begin to create a convincing illusion. Then I gather more details, from additional research and experience and my imagination, as I need them as I proceed. But in terms of my imagination: by that point it's an informed imagination, in terms of what I am making up.

JW: So many of your short stories have such a novelistic feel about them, when do you decide to make the jump to a book-length project?

JS: I've only done that once, when I felt as though what I'd covered in a story—in this case, a story called "Nosferatu" about FW Murnau's making of that film—hadn't gotten at all I'd wanted to explore. The story then became a novel.

JW: One subject of research that you didn't pursue in a project was Charles Lindberg, and I was fascinated by what you said about how you didn't "empathize with him enough, or in complicated enough

ways.” What is it that allows you to connect on an emotional level to a potential character? What are you looking for as you get to know one?

JS: It’s not a matter of whether or not what I’m reading about would “make a good story,” since any infinite number of narratives would do that. It’s a matter of whether or not I find the dilemmas I’m reading about—which are mostly emotional dilemmas—so compelling that they stay with me; that I don’t stop thinking about them.

JW: That empathy that you speak of feels integral to your ability to write so compellingly from a range of human experiences and perspectives. What is your relationship to your characters? Do you feel a sense of responsibility for them? Or are you more compelled by curiosity and the hope of understanding them?

JS: I’m trying to understand them. I’m teaching myself as I go. Of course I care about them, to some extent, in that I want to honor their potential humanity; on the other hand, I recognize that they’re at bottom really just an assemblage of words on a page. And of course I always want to be as clear-eyed about the choices they make as I possibly can be.

JW: Speaking of empathy, it is the rare writer who can shine a light on the humanity inherent in unlikely subjects, from Nazi pilots to French Revolution executioners to the Creature from the Black Lagoon. Do you find a particular attraction to humanizing what may seem at first unhumanizable?

JS: Yes. I think writing of the sort I admire is all about trying to extend your empathetic reach. I think the arts are all about that.

JW: In addition to the Creature, we’ve also had the Megalodon, the

Yeti, and cameo appearances by Godzilla and Nosferatu. Can we expect Nessie in the near future?

JS: I'd love to write about Nessie. I haven't found a way to do so, yet. Maybe I'll visit Loch Ness—something I've also long wanted to do—and see if something occurs to me.

JW: You're frequently referred to as a writer's writer; that is, you're universally respected and appreciated within the writing community, but like most other authors trafficking in serious, gut-checking fiction, virtually (and shamefully) unknown outside of it. Given that many of your stories address pertinent issues today (e.g. "The Netherlands Lives with Water" and global warming, *Project X* and widespread gun violence), do you think there's something more writers can or must do to reach more readers in order to help effect change, or is what we have now the best we can hope for?

JS: I would love to know what that something that writers can do would be. I try to do some self-promotion in the form of readings, interviews like this, etc., because I do recognize that if we believe in what we're doing, we *should* be trying to reach more people, but I also recognize the limitations of what we can accomplish, given the state of our culture's disinterest in literature.

JW: Is there a plausible alternative?

JS: Other media. Which is one of the other reasons so many fiction writers are seduced by screenplays, for example.

JW: I suppose a long term view would be, where do you think the state of this type of fiction is headed, if it is no longer deemed relevant to pop culture?

JS: I agree with Charlie Baxter, who sees literary fiction as soon occupying the sort of niche that poetry occupies.

JW: Your story, “Your Fate Hurtles Down at You” was first published digitally in *Electronic Literature*. Each year, more traditional literary journals are shuttering their print operations in favor of online/digital editions, and it is generally assumed that the transition from analog, paper books to digital is a *fait accompli*. Do you think this is something writers should prepare for?

JS: Maybe the good news is that writers don’t really need to prepare for it, other than learning about what sort of digital/online outlets are springing up. Writers should write, and worry about that first.

JW: I was struck by something you said in an interview with *Vice* about how time can shift a writer’s relationship to a project (or potential project) and that “. . . maybe the stuff that you might have been ready to write in April, by the time you get a chance to get to it in December you’re not that person anymore.” I wonder if this applies to your relationship to your past work. Do you ever revisit it and, if so, is there value in that process?

JS: I’ve only revisited very old work once to any advantage: the aforementioned “Alicia and Emmett with the 17th Lancers at Balaclava” was a story that I got stuck on in graduate school, and never wanted to abandon. I returned to it once I’d had children, and the hidden usefulness of the story’s dominant metaphoric comparison suddenly seemed clearer to me with that new perspective.

JW: What about in-the-drawer projects or threads of research you’ve abandoned? Does letting time pass help you glimpse subjects of interest in a new way? Or are you more compelled by what you’re immediately investigating, reading, or experiencing?

INTERVIEW

JS: Other than “Alicia and Emmett” usually if I don’t get to something within a fair amount of time, I’ve moved on and become someone else, and it never gets pursued. Although maybe Nessie will be another exception. ■