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Abstract

Joe Blair is the author of the memoir *By the Iowa Sea*. He is also a HVAC repairman working in Carolville, Iowa. Joe's book is a narrative about marriage and family, and the struggles he encounters during the Iowa flood, a natural disaster in 2008 that became an agent of change in his life. *By the Iowa Sea* was chosen by *Publisher's Weekly* as one of the Top 10 memoirs of 2012. This interview was conducted in January of 2012 over telephone and email.

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A Conversation with Joe Blair

by Mick Powers

*Joe Blair is the author of the memoir *By the Iowa Sea*. He is also a HVAC repairman working in Carolville, Iowa. Joe's book is a narrative about marriage and family, and the struggles he encounters during the Iowa flood, a natural disaster in 2008 that became an agent of change in his life. *By the Iowa Sea* was chosen by *Publisher's Weekly* as one of the Top 10 memoirs of 2012. This interview was conducted in January of 2012 over telephone and email.*



You attended Iowa's Workshop and concentrated on nonfiction writing. Did you always want to write memoir?

I didn't know much about any of it until Deb and I arrived in Iowa. We came in from the north on 35, and the first thing we did was find a library because we needed to do a little research. By "research" I mean, we needed to find out where the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop was located. We knew it was at a state school, but we didn't know whether it was at Iowa State, Northern Iowa, or University of Iowa. The reference librarian laughed at us. He said, "Um...that would be in Iowa City. Yes. The University of Iowa." So, we jumped back on the motorcycle and rode south to 80 and then over to Iowa City. I figured what the hell. I'd attend the Workshop and then figure things out from there. I didn't know what a big deal it was to get accepted. I applied to poetry and nonfiction. They didn't want me in the poetry workshop, but the form letter thanked me for applying and reassured me that they had to turn away many "quality applicants". I was a horrible poet. I don't think I was much better at nonfiction, but I somehow got lucky and they took me. Deb was pregnant with our first child at the time, and I remember thinking that if I didn't get in, I wouldn't write anymore. That would show them, wouldn't it? But I did get in, and I've had to keep at it for the past twenty years.

Have I always wanted to write a memoir? No. I'm not a big memoir reader. I find that memoirs, on the whole, make me a little bit sick to my stomach. I think the problem is that the aim of a memoir is generally too high – to take something from life and find meaning in it. When you aim high and miss, it's much worse than when you aim low and miss because you have farther to fall. Take folk songs for instance: Folk songs aim high. Folk singers sing in coffee houses and on street corners. They trade in commercialism for The Truth. And when it's right, it's amazing. But, is there anything worse than a bad folk song? All that bombast and misplaced sincerity? If there is anything worse in the world than a bad folk song, I don't know what it is. On the other hand, you sort of expect a country song to be bad. And country songs don't have any grand aims. So when you hear a bad country song, it doesn't bother you so much.

Your book, By the Iowa Sea, mentions your adventures as a young twenty something. And then you attended Iowa. Did you take yourself seriously as a writer back then? When did you decide writing should be a priority in your life?

When I was in my twenties, I'd laugh at people who used phrases like "take yourself seriously as a writer." I didn't understand what should be so serious about writing. Writing was a fun thing for me. And it was a rebellious thing. It blew my mind that any one of us could write whatever we wanted to write. *Whatever we wanted to write.* It amazed me. What more freedom could anyone ask for? When I finished writing all the forbidden words George Carlin could think of – shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits – and telling everyone in the world to go fuck themselves, I found that I was out of material and needed to begin again. So I did. I began again. And again. And again.

In the program, I thought I was a writer even though I never did write much. I

figured a person either had it or didn't have it. (Which is bullshit, by the way. The truth is, you either work hard or you don't.) Sometimes, I'd stay away from writing for months at a time, and I figured it didn't matter. I thought I could just pick it back up. I was a big golfer back then. I played three or four times a week. I had no time for anything else.

One time, Deb and I were at a party and we all were in a discussion about what our dream job would be. "What would you be if you could be anything in the world? No limits." People wanted to be professional athletes or stunt pilots or whatever. I said I wanted to be a writer. My friend, Nate, looked at me sideways. "Come on," he said. "No limits." "Yeah," I said. "I'd want to be a writer. That's what I'd be." "Well," said Nate, "That doesn't sound like a very big stretch. Why don't you do it?" I laughed it off at the party, but I thought about it later. Why didn't I do it? Why hadn't I done it? Was I afraid to want something and then to get it?

Soon after that party, I began taking steps to become a writer. For one thing, I gave up golf. I didn't begin to improve as a writer until then. I decided that if I was ever going to make anything of myself as a writer, I'd need to spend the number of hours I had spent on the golf course writing. I took myself "seriously as a writer" as they say. I made writing a priority. It was the first thing I did. Every day. And then things began to happen in my writing. I felt myself improving. It was encouraging to actually improve at something because I never did improve at golf, despite all the time I put in.

Did you think about getting published after you left the MFA program? What does it mean for a writer to be published? Does this make them a writer?

One guy from the *New Yorker* gave a talk to the workshop people. It was a long spiel about how no one can just send something to the *New Yorker* and get in. And one of the students asked, "So, how can we get in?" And the guys answered by saying, "Indeed." These are the douchebags you're dealing with when you try to get published. Someone with a sense of superiority for no apparent reason at all. It's not an easy hurdle to get over, guys like that guy. But there is hope. All you need, really, is to make a single person fall in love with your work. Just one person. And if, by some strange chance, that one person has the power to publish your work, your work will be published.

I wasn't ready to send my stuff out when I graduated from the program. I didn't believe I was good enough, and I think I was correct in this belief. It took me a long time to embrace the idea of being a writer. And then it took another long time for me to actually believe I was a writer. To actually say it out loud when people asked what I did. I had a reaction against unpublished people who claimed to be writers. I considered this to be a pretentious stance to take in the world. But the truth is, I was afraid to say it. I was afraid to try. I thought I would fail. The evolution of a writer, I think, is a lot like the evolution of a marriage. You build faith by working at the marriage. And you work at the marriage when you have faith in it. It's sort of a fragile structure, and it goes both ways. The whole thing can come crashing down quickly when the cycle happens

the other way around. You lose faith. And because you have lost faith, you cease to work. And because you have ceased to work, you lose more faith.

After I got serious about writing, about eight years ago, I kept thinking that if I wrote something good enough, it couldn't be denied. Someone would have to take it. By the time Simon and Schuster bought my book, I think I was ready to say, when people asked, "I'm a refrigeration mechanic and a writer." I believed in myself as a writer and I think it showed on the page.

But I still don't understand my initial urge to get published. It's a mystery to me. It seems almost primal. I know it's not about money. I think it might be about loneliness. Spending so much time alone, working on a medium of communication, is like being engaged in one half of a conversation. You are saying something to no one. And no one is responding.

I don't know if being published changes any of that. I guess I'll see.

Your book deals primarily with the struggles you endured over a relatively short period of time. When did you know this was the memoir you wanted to write?

I didn't *want* to write it. It was a day-by-day thing. It was a thing I had decided to do and willed myself to do and, after a time, it was a thing I had to do. I had grown dependent upon it. We'd write about an hour a day, my writing partner and I. We'd sit across from one another, open our computers, and we wouldn't stop writing for an hour. And then we'd read aloud whatever it was we'd written. You can get a lot done this way. Sometimes two thousand words or so. We call it fast writing. It's the only way I write. Most of the chapters in the book came from these writing sessions. Some of the longer chapters represent two sessions.

After I got an essay placed in the "Modern Love" section of the Sunday's *Times*, I received a few calls from agents. I flew to New York to meet with them and came home to Iowa feeling like a real live writer. My new agent wanted a book to sell. After five or six years of writing, after the flood and the affair and everything that attended it, the only thing I had was hundreds of these little one-hour essays. It was like a bramble of writing. No arc. No theme. Each day I had written a completely different essay from the day before and the day after. It would be easy to believe, reading these essays, that they were written by different people. One essay would be angry. One would be loving. One would be about the dog. One would be about the history of Dubuque. It was an impossible thing to think of getting a book out of it, but I was a real live writer now with a real live literary agent, so I figured I had to do it. And I did it.

Writing this book was sort of like trying to piece together a jigsaw puzzle with pieces you made yourself but which didn't fit together at all. And there was no box and no picture. It was impossible.

You seem to carry the reader through the experiences in the book both as a guide and someone who doesn't know anything more than the next guy. But your book carries a

great deal of wisdom. How does life experience play a role in when you write a memoir? Could you have written a similar book ten years ago?

It may seem like I'm guiding the reader through experiences and coming to some grain of what you call "wisdom," but actually I'm finding my way in the dark as I write. I start writing in a certain direction, but I never know where I'll end up. I do believe that I am guided as I write. At least, that's what it feels like. I think all of us who write have felt, at times, brought along by some larger current of thought, surer and wiser than our own, as we write. Of course, this doesn't always happen. Once in a while, I start out believing there's something for me to uncover in the essay I'm working on, only to lose all direction once I'm inside it. These essays I abandon. This doesn't happen too often, though. Most often, when I feel called to start off in a certain direction, there is a payoff hidden somewhere down the line. It's a lot of fun to find out what happens in an essay from beginning to end. The feeling, as I've said, is that I am brought to some understanding rather than I am bringing the reader to some understanding, so that the essay, itself, is alive with the search for whatever it might be there is to find in it. If I knew the outcome of an essay before I began, it would be no fun for me. And I've learned that if I'm bored writing an essay, the reader is bored reading it. How could it be otherwise? On the other hand, the enthusiasm I have as I write as well as the strong and freeing belief that everything has to do with everything else (the rings of Saturn, for instance, have everything to do with the spider web in the window pane) – this enthusiasm and freedom makes the jump from my mind to the paper and then again to the mind of the reader without too much interference. (This last sentence wasn't a good one and I think I might have just disproven the very point I was trying to make. Win some lose some.)

Everything you write in the book, from your job as a heating and air conditioning repairman to your personal struggles as a husband and father, comes from the perspective of an ordinary guy. When writing memoir, why is it important to write yourself as you are and not aggrandize yourself?

The word "fiction" comes from some Greek word that means "fashion." Everything that is written is fashioned by the writer. Therefore, everything written might be classified as fiction. Looking at it this way, everything is fiction. The term "nonfiction" (non-fashioned) seems ridiculous. And the idea that we can write ourselves as non-fashioned characters – as facts – makes no sense. Imagine it: Every snippet of thought. Every twinge of the spirit. Every blink of the eye. Not only would that be impossible, it would be incredibly boring. As writers, we need to fashion some voice that we can use in order to advance our thoughts on the page.

That's not to say there's no difference between what we call a *novel* and what we call an *autobiography*. Or what we call a *short story* and what we call an *essay*. There is a difference. The main difference, I think, is that, in the memoir or essay, the reader

perceives the voice of the narrator to be the voice of the author. This is a tricky position for the author to be in because if he presents himself as an asshole (even though he might indeed be an asshole), the reader won't like him and therefore won't read him. Conversely, in the novel or short story, there can be a hundred assholes, and the reader views them as *characters in a fictional story* and therefore might forgive them their assholishness. Or maybe not. Either way, any particular character is not understood to be the author, and the author is not understood to be any particular character.

This idea of the narrator "being" the author can't help but affect how we think when we're writing creative nonfiction. It presented a problem for me because my book is about the change that occurs in my narrator (myself) over a period of a few weeks. I didn't know how to write myself as the selfish, angry, confused person I had been before the change without the reader hating me and putting the book down. I kept thinking about *A Christmas Carol* as a memoir. How do you write Scrooge as a sympathetic character? I decided that Scrooge, in order to be likable, would need to be totally honest about his transgressions. Sort of an honest, bumbling, somewhat humorous guy. And the essays with this voice were the essays I chose for the book. I couldn't allow myself to show too much anger on the page, or bitterness, and I had to avoid any suggestion of self-pity, even though I had plenty of all these things. I forced myself to think about the reader and the reader's reaction to what I had written in those hundreds of short essays. That was part of the job of piecing this puzzle together.

I tried to think of my reader as someone I was talking to at a party. People don't like talking to braggarts at parties. Someone who is the hero of every story he tells. People don't like talking to liars. So, you can't lie to your readers. If you think they won't know you're lying, you are wrong. They will know. You can't brag. You can't feel sorry for yourself. These things, on the page just as they are off the page, are not attractive traits.

Editor's Note: This is an excerpt from a longer, 7,000 word interview that will appear in our next print issue, Booth 4, in December 2012.

Mick Powers received his MFA from Butler University. He lives in Indianapolis with his wife and daughter. He teaches writing at IUPUI.

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