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The First Time I Figured Out What My Novel Was About

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My First Time is a regular feature in which writers talk about virgin experiences in their writing and publishing careers, ranging from their first rejection to the moment of holding their first published book in their hands. Today's guest is Bryan Furuness, author of the novel, [The Lost Episodes of Revie Bryson](#), coming soon from [Black Lawrence Press](#). His stories have appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Southeast Review*, *Hobart*, and elsewhere, including *New Stories from the Midwest* and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*. He teaches at Butler University, and is editor-in-chief of the small press, [Pressgang](#). [Click here](#) to visit Furuness' website.



The First Time I Figured Out What My Novel Was About

The Prompt

A writer's conference, a sleepy Saturday. There I am, in a nearly empty auditorium, listening to Porter Shreve lead a handful of writers through an exercise.

I don't remember the exact prompt, but it was for idea generation, which was the last thing I needed. I was several years and even more drafts into a novel that wouldn't come together. What I really needed was an idea about how to finish the fucking thing.

So I loafed my way into the exercise, but then I found myself recalling one of the most powerful memories from my childhood, one that I haven't, until now, written about publicly.

I want to say that I was twelve years old when this happened, but it's possible I was as young as nine, or as old as fourteen. I remember riding in the back seat of my family's blue Omega. It was a Sunday—I know this because we were going to church—and we were driving over the big bridge to Highland when my mother told me that my older brother wasn't actually my brother. He was my half-brother. My mother had been married before.

In the back seat, my little brother and I looked at each other, the same look we exchanged

whenever we were both in big trouble. My voice sounded funny when I said, "Okay."

The memory cuts out there, but I don't think I'm missing anything important. My parents didn't warn me not to tell anybody, but then, they didn't have to. It was obviously a secret. That day it became my secret.

Even now, around thirty years later, it feels strange to write about it. I find myself hoping that my family doesn't read this. I don't think it would embarrass my mother, but then again, it might. My people aren't big into "getting things out in the open." When things do get out, we mainly ignore them until they go away. For instance, at a family reunion when one of my jackass cousins got out his guitar and started singing AC/DC's "Big Balls," we all talked a little louder and pretended it wasn't happening. He must have sang the chorus eight times in a row (*He's got big balls/And she's got big balls/But we've got the biggest balls of them all!*) before he got disgusted with our lack of a reaction, and took his big balls elsewhere. The rest of us got another cup of coffee and carried on our conversation, because that's what Scandinavians do.

Some sketchy cousins aside, I have a good and loving family. And I have my own good family and good life now, though at times I feel straitjacketed by politeness.

Except when I'm writing fiction. And maybe that's why I write: it's the only time I can take off the corset of niceties, and actually *breathe* for once. I might not be able to wail "Big Balls" in public, or act out my *Animal House* fantasy of smashing a guitar in a stairwell, but my characters can.

Other than that, I never thought my fiction had much to do with my real life.

The Elevator Pitch

In my book, *The Lost Episodes of Revie Bryson*, there's a mother who likes to make up Bible stories, which she claims are "lost episodes," or outtakes from the King James version. After years of listening to these stories, her son starts to believe that he's the second coming of Christ. Faith can be fickle, though, and Revie's belief in God and his family is scuttled when his mother leaves home to pursue her dreams of stardom in Hollywood.

That's the book. But that mother isn't my mother. Their situation is not my situation. If you had asked me at that writer's conference why I felt compelled to write about these people, I wouldn't have had a good answer.

The Rest of the Story

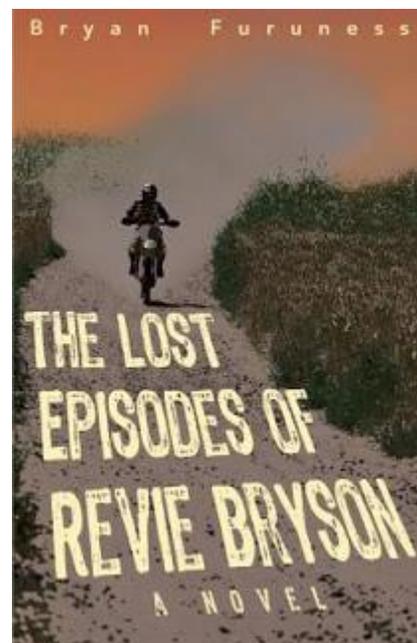
My mother never sat me down to tell me the full story of her first marriage, but over the years, I was able to piece it together from little fragments and asides. She dropped out of college to live with this wild man in a trailer park. He was a biker, and would leave her alone with her newborn son for days or weeks at a time without telling her where he was going or when he would be back. I remember something about a motorcycle crash, a head injury, and how, after that, he was even more "off."

When she decided to leave, he threatened her. She was never specific about those threats, but I got the idea that he was dangerous, maybe crazy. But my mother didn't cave, or even hide. She did the bravest thing: came home to her parents, began the slow process of making a life for herself and her son.

To understand how amazing, how *unbelievable* these stories were to me, you have to understand that the woman telling them was a fourth-grade teacher who wore embroidered sweatshirts and was intimidated by video cameras. She wasn't completely tame—she was the union steward at her school, and one of my earliest memories is of marching in a picket line with her—but she wasn't wild, either. Her idea of fun on a Friday night was attending a high school basketball game. So when she told stories of her life as a dropout, a trailer park woman, a motorcycle mama, my head felt like it was splitting open.

"How can that happen?" I said to the other writers in the auditorium when we shared the results of the writing exercise. "How can you go from one type of person to a completely different type of person? And how do you keep that first person a secret all those years?"

"Those sound like the kind of questions that can drive a book," said Shreve. And I thought, well,



yeah, maybe, but I don't want to start another book. I mean, I'm already working on this one, and it doesn't have anything to do with—

And then I got that old feeling, like my head was splitting open. After the mother in my book comes back home, the whole family moves downstate and agrees that they'll never talk about this stuff again. That year of wildness becomes their own Lost Episode.

That mother might not be my mother, and the boy isn't me, but he's wrestling with the same questions: How can you be one person and then another? How can you be one person on the outside, and have a totally different private self?

That was the day that I saw the idea that ran like a vein all through my work, not just that novel. Rebirth. Resurrection. Or to put it in the secular, oh-so-American term: reinvention. "There are no second acts in American lives," said Fitzgerald, and I can forgive him for that whopper because he said it before we had Oliver North, John Travolta, George Foreman, Jerry Rubin, Stephen King/Richard Bachman/Stephen King again, Jefferson Airplane/Jefferson Starship/Starship, the rebuilding of post-Katrina New Orleans, Chrysler during the Iacocca years, Ray Lewis, postmodernism, every guy who has ever had a mid-life crisis, 8.6 million American women who had cosmetic surgery last year—my point is, with all due respect to Fitzgerald, America has become the land of second acts. My point is, right after I found out that I'm obsessed with resurrection, I figured out I wasn't the only one.

And then I was able to finish the novel.

Photo by Miriam Berkley