

7-15-2016

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Recommended Citation

Marsh, David J. (2016) "A Conversation with Ben H. Winters," *Booth*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 7 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol8/iss7/3>

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Abstract

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Cover Page Footnote

"A Conversation with Ben H. Winters" was originally published at [Booth](#).



BOOTH



A JOURNAL

July 15, 2016

A Conversation with Ben H. Winters

by David J. Marsh

When you're asking him a question he looks right at you. He leans in. Behind his sincere smile there is no evidence that he is thinking about his answer as you speak; only listening. But, once you've finished, he sits back. The energy – always pulsing through his boyish frame – seems to ball up, to gather. He runs a hand through his trimmed, thick dark hair, gives a simple introductory nod of understanding, of anticipation, perhaps an "OK", or "Right," and then he is off. And his answer comes, it rolls out with conviction and joy, and it's what you hoped for. You've tapped the energy, but also the generosity, and the focus – the literary passions of the man.

*Ben H. Winters' new novel is titled *Underground Airlines*. He is widely known as the author of *The Last Policeman* trilogy, a series of sci-fi detective thrillers that includes *The Last Policeman*, *Countdown City*, and *World of Trouble*. The first won the Edgar Award in 2012; the second was an NPR Best Book of 2013 and winner of the Philip K. Dick Award for Distinguished Science Fiction. Winters' other books include *The Secret Life of Ms. Finkleman*, *The Mystery of the Missing Everything*, and *The New York Times* bestselling novel *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*.*

*Earlier in his career, Winters was a 2009-2010 fellow of the Dramatists Guild and authored plays for young audiences, such as *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, *A (Tooth) Fairy Tale*, and *Uncle Pirate*, as well as plays for not-young audiences—the 2008 off-Broadway musical *Slut* and the jukebox musical *Breaking Up Is Hard to Do*. Along the way, his journalism appeared in *The Chicago Reader*, *The Nation*, *In These Times*, *USA Today*, and *Huffington Post*. Winters recently sat down with David J. Marsh of *Booth* to discuss, among other things, his new novel.*

David J. Marsh: *Underground Airlines* is set in an alternate present, in which the American Civil War was averted by a compromise and four states still allow slavery. The novel opens with a conversation between Jim Dirkson, a free African-American,

and Father Barton, a young Irish priest. Why did you decide to open with these characters in this conversation?

Ben H. Winters: These two characters are in a diner, which is based loosely on the Lincoln Square Pancake House on Meridian Street in Indianapolis. One of them is asking the other to help him, employing a series of strategies, and the other character is refusing. The thing is, neither of these guys is what they seem, and there is a lot going on that we don't get to until later.

Hopefully the first chapter of *Airlines* does what genre-novel first chapters need to do—which is launch us immediately into a forward-motion series of events, but also introduce deeper levels of the story. By the end of that chapter, we are involved with the plot, and we know that this is a world like ours, and also not like ours. Then we are intrigued and unsettled in all the right ways, hopefully.

DM: As a fiction writer, you seem to embrace the role of research. In this novel you lay out an entire modern slave economy with outsourcing, pro sports, NGOs, food-supply oversight, and more. How did you go about the world-building for this novel?

BW: I'm not just comfortable doing some research. For me, it's essential. I discovered this working on *The Last Policeman* books. If you're going to create a fictional reality, it must be deeply grounded in the *real* reality. When I'm working on a book, and I'm always working on a book, I go on long jags of reading directed toward the novel. I read a lot of fiction—such as novels or plays or stories with a similar setting—and I especially read a lot of nonfiction. For this book, that meant histories of American slavery and of the economic impact of racial inequality. A few years ago, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote a long article for *The Atlantic* in which he made the case for reparations, or at least a public conversation about reparations, and traced the economic legacy of slavery through many generations. That was one of the first things I read, and it was incredibly eye-opening. Coates's book *Between the World and Me* came out just as I was finishing this novel, and he inspired me all over again.

Another book came out last year called *The Half Has Never Been Told*, by Edward Baptist, a history professor. This book was extremely helpful to me in understanding how the economic engine of slavery worked, and how it interacted with the rest of the American economy. I also read a book titled *Complicity*, about how the slave trade was crucial in building industries in non-slave states like Rhode Island and New York.

I also like to call experts, for example people who study supply chains or divestment campaigns. In my novel, there are boycotts of the United States like there were of South Africa during apartheid. So I try to get these kinds of experts to talk to me,

which isn't hard, because people in general love to be interviewed and, often, are fascinated by the fiction-writing process.

Of course at a certain point you have to let go of the researching and just start trusting your intuition, following your instincts. Because no primary source will tell you how to write *your* book, just like no previously published novel is going to guide you into *your* novel. The impossible and beautiful thing about writing books is that every one is its own thing. Every one comes with its own rules and delivers its own particular challenges and rewards.

DM: It seems like *Underground Airlines* would have been a tough early novel—like maybe more of a risk, the sort of challenging topic for an established author to tackle. How did your previous work prepare you for writing this book?

BW: Mainly in the technical aspects, like I discussed with the research and so on. And maybe the experience of *The Last Policeman* series, of having used the genre construct to approach some larger philosophical issues, led me to *Airlines*, which tries to do that same thing: Let's take this familiar *kind* of novel, the mystery/thriller, and use it as a lens through which to look more closely at our shared experience.

But on the output side of it, in the marketplace, having some sales behind me and having won a couple of awards helps. If nothing else, it gives me legitimacy with booksellers and librarians and reviewers. This is not just some joker doing a potentially controversial book on race, this is a joker with a track record.

Ultimately, of course, none of that matters. When you sit down to read, it's just you and the book, which is the most beautiful thing about all of this. None of the publicity, none of your sense of the writer's reputation, nothing matters. It's just you and the book, having your relationship.

DM: The opening scene in *Underground Airlines* is set in Indianapolis. As we speak you are in the midst of relocating from Indianapolis to L.A. What are your hopes as you head to one of the creative capitals of the world?

BW: Right now I am just focused on getting there in one piece. My wife and I have three young kids, and we both have multiple ongoing responsibilities in Indy, so there's going to be a lot of getting settled, getting the kids figured out in school, and a lot of flying back and forth. So it's going to be a time of great churn, which, on the plus side, I find to be creatively exciting. I do good work when I'm not bored, and life is not going to be boring for the Winters family this year.

DM: You've had conversations with Hollywood before, with *The Last Policeman* books—options, talk of options. And it seems to be happening again with *Underground Airlines*. How is the chatter with them different this time around?

BW: *The Last Policeman* books have been optioned repeatedly, which just means someone gives you a relatively small amount of money for the right to maybe, possibly do something with your book within the next year. Nothing has come of those options. It will hopefully be optioned again, but we'll see. What's different this time is that *Airlines* has been optioned by a company called Legendary, and they've actually moved forward with developing a pilot based on the book. And they hired *me* to write the pilot.

Bear in mind there are still about a thousand steps before anything is actually on television. But it is definitely exciting, and creatively challenging, and intellectually fascinating to learn a new medium.

DM: Was there ever a time in your life when you weren't going to be a writer? Where else might we have found Ben H. Winters?

BW: Well, you know, I've always written. I've always loved writing, but I guess the real question is, was there ever a time I wasn't going to be a capital-W, professional writer, a person who puts "writer" on his tax return and can answer without embarrassment that he is a writer when people ask him at parties what he does for a living. So in answer to the first question, yes, I've always been a writer. When I was ten years old, I was writing goofy stories on notebook paper and circulating them among my classmates. But there were many, many, many times in my life when it was more likely than not I wouldn't be a writer.

The first thing I wanted to be was a musician, and I played bass and guitar in bands through high school and college. Later I wanted to be a standup comedian, and then I worked as a journalist at a free weekly in Chicago, and then I lived in New York and wrote plays and musicals. And through all of these non-remunerative pseudo-careers I worked various day jobs, notably as a transcriptionist, typing up interviews for journalists and ghostwriters and documentarians.

I guess I might have been a lawyer, and I came very close on a few occasions to taking the LSAT, but ultimately the closest I came to law school was marrying a law professor.

DM: Do you feel that there is a larger, driving concern behind your work?

BW: In terms of *The Last Policeman* and its two sequels—and I guess I sort of date the beginning of my real career to those books, as much as I love the earlier stuff—I think there is no question I am really interested in death and in the way people live their lives in relation to the fact of death. Although if you had asked me before I wrote *The Last Policeman*, I doubt I would have said, “I am really interested in the subject of death’s inevitability and what it means about the way we order our lives.” I would have said, “I am going to write this cool detective novel with a big sci-fi conceit.” But as I wrote, I realized, *Ah, cool, good. Now I see what this thing is about.*

That’s an amazing thing about the process of writing. Often you figure out what you’re interested in—what you *really* want to write about—only through the actual work of writing.

I will say that with this new book, *Underground Airlines*, that process was somewhat more intentional. I was very interested in writing about structural racism in American society and the long, dark shadow of slavery. I was also very interested in the notion of complicity, of all the bad things we allow ourselves to be okay with because they do not affect us directly. This is me talking, as a white person from a relatively comfortable background, someone who lives in America in 2016 and can say, “God, racism is an enduring evil. Inequality is an entrenched problem,” and yet know that these things do not affect my life on a day-to-day basis. They are not *my* problems, and yet they *are* my problems because this is my country, and the people who *do* directly experience these problems are my fellow human beings.

So with *Underground Airlines*, the central conceit—a version of America in which slavery never ended—formed itself around big ideas from the very beginning, much more so than with the Last Policeman books.

On the other hand, who the hell knows? I find that the origins of a book quickly become shrouded in mystery once you’re immersed in the writing, when you’re in that period where it feels like you’ve been working on it forever, and will be working on it until you die.

DM: What did you enjoy about writing young-adult literature?

BW: Actually, technically, officially, I have never written young adult. I have written two middle-grade novels, meaning targeted at ages eight to twelve, and I have written a handful of books of scary poems for the “juvenile” category, which I think means like elementary school. I really like the sense of humor and the general spirit of wild goofiness that comes with being a little kid. But YA properly means for teenagers, and I’d stink at writing for teenagers. I don’t have any sensitivity to the teenage soul. I

look back at my own adolescence with no particular nostalgia or interest. Primarily I remember drinking a lot of soda.

DM: You also wrote for the musical stage, with respectable success and significant collaboration. What aspects of the stage writing have you brought to your fiction?

BW: Hopefully a certain ear for dialogue, and the idea that every scene has to be driven by conflict: a clash between the needs and wants of one person and the needs and wants of another person. On stage, people must be trying to *do* something, to *get* something, or the moment is flat. The formal structure of a novel is obviously much different, but the rule applies. What do these characters want? What do they need? How are they trying to get those things? Those are always the right questions to be asking yourself.

I also developed in my theater days an openness to collaboration that has served me well. When making a musical, you get a lot of notes from a lot of people, and you learn to filter the useful feedback from the less-useful, and also to take all those notes with grace. That's very valuable in fiction writing, at least if you want to be published. You need to be able to listen to your first readers, your agent, your publisher, and eventually your audience without being prickly or defensive. Writers must be sensitive enough to channel human souls, to see and reflect other people's lives, and simultaneously thick-skinned enough to weather a lot of criticism. This is a life-long lesson that I'm still learning, but my theater days definitely helped.

DM: What other artistic forms or mediums have influenced you?

BW: Music. Rock music, mostly, but a lot of classical and opera and sometimes jazz. Musical theater, obviously. I'm not sure how it's influenced me in general, but I can tell you that I admire how songwriters like Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello and Lucinda Williams can include so much detail and specificity in such a confined format as a song.

Like this: "Crack of the pool ball, neon buzzin'/telephone ringing, it's your second cousin."

That's Tom Waits, from "The Heart of Saturday Night." I mean, you learn a whole heck of a lot from those thirteen words, don't you? About the character, the moment, the feel of the whole world. I aspire to write with such clarity and force.

DM: Why is reading just as important for a writer as writing?

BW: I mean, it's kind of a chicken-and-egg thing. If you're trying to be a writer and you have to be told that reading is important, you might want to try to be something else. The most astonishing thing I've ever heard from writing students is when they're asked what they like to read, and they're sort of like "I don't like to read that much." Because, really, that's how you learn to write. By reading and reading and reading, you get all sorts of specific technical things—like how to end chapters, and how to structure a plot, and how to reveal the full truth of someone's character bit by bit—and you also just sort of breathe in the stylistic power and the emotional force of good fiction writing. And all of that seeps into your own work, over time and with much practice. That's the never-ending work of writing. The cheesy metaphor is that good writing is fuel for your own fire, but it's a cheesy metaphor that happens to be true.

DM: What is a little-known, under-recognized modern classic in your genre that readers should check out?

BW: In science fiction, *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban. In mystery fiction, anything by Megan Abbott—she's not under-recognized, really, but she's not yet as famous as she should be. Try *The Fever*; that one was great.

DM: Why should writers read genre fiction? What can they learn from it that might be helpful in writing what we'd call literary fiction?

BW: The proper distinction isn't between genre fiction and literary fiction, it's between good fiction and bad. A lot of so-called genre fiction—like *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* or, I don't know, *Frankenstein*—is not only exciting and fast-paced and fun, it is also powerful and moving. Whereas a lot of literary fiction—and I'm not going to give examples, thank you—is dull as wallpaper because nothing happens in it. All of the moment is undramatized emotional movement, or the author is excellent at describing things (be they mountains or marriages) but forgets that in books, as in life, things get interesting when events actually occur.

DM: As a reader, what excites you most in good writing?

BW: Delay. A lot of times, writers rush to give us information, to present us with the fruits of their genius. But the real genius is in holding back. The longer you can delay giving me information about a character or a situation, the more fulfilling it is to satisfy this need that has been created.

DM: You've said that one of the greatest skills writers can develop is the skill of thinking about themselves as little as possible. Could you expand on that?

BW: Man, that sounds like a jerky thing to say. Are you sure I said that? I bet I did. I was probably trying to express my distaste for the idea of writing as primarily a means of “self-expression.” For me, it’s not *Write what you know*; it’s *Write what you want to know*. Find yourself interested in something, go out and learn all about it, and in the process of learning all about it, discover characters and let the characters lead you into a story.

DM: You’ve gathered some hard-earned perspective on the discipline of writing, specifically time management and how to complete projects. Can you discuss your relationship to self-discipline?

BW: Let’s be honest here: Writing is hard. It’s actually sort of impossible. I’ve written half a dozen novels, and I still don’t know how anybody does it. So when you’re writing, you will always find yourself wanting to do other things—make more coffee, check email, watch TV, look at Facebook, check your email again.

So, yeah, I do think self-discipline is equally important to creativity in terms of pursuing a professional career, and also much easier to learn. I cannot overstate how important this is: you can have the best ideas in the world, but if you can’t figure out how to get yourself to sit down and write, you’re not a writer. You’re a person with an idea for a book, and that’s a much larger category.

For me, it wasn’t until after I got married and had kids that I became successful as a writer (and I mean successful as an artist, I don’t mean commercially), because my time was so much more limited. In my twenties I would get home from whatever dumb job I had and go, “Well, now I am going to write all night!” And I would turn on my computer and open a beer and sit there and goof around, check email, watch some TV, and, man, I didn’t write anything.

DM: I think these things are helpful because they are the opposite of all that ambiguity about the muse and inspiration. What about being organized? How have you made organization—to-do lists, deadlines, and so forth—work in your favor?

BW: Here’s what I do: Every night, when I’m going to be writing the next day, which is generally every weekday, unless I’m traveling or something, I make a list of things I want to do. *Outline chapter four. Rewrite chapter nine. Think about Leo’s backstory.* That kind of thing. I also make a schedule for the day, you know: *9:00 drop off the kids, 11:30 phone call with so-and-so, 1:15 dentist appointment*, whatever. Then I carefully slot each of my tasks into one of those time slots.

Invariably, the day doesn't go as planned. I'll get on a tear with task one and never get to task two, or I decide it's more important to do something else, or there will be a phone call: The kid is sick, or the dental appointment got moved. Whatever. Life happens. But having a plan is invaluable.

I basically pretend I'm a very busy executive or an on-call doctor, some sort of person whose time is precisely regimented and precious. I think as a writer you have to constantly trick yourself into staying on task.

DM: Where do you struggle in the process of writing? What causes you fits?

BW: I struggle in every aspect, every day. Everything gives me fits. Characters, plotting, dialogue, fits, fits, fits. In mystery writing, I question whether I've given enough clues, or too many. I freak out about the timeline of the present-day story and the backstory. Every day I am revealed in my own mind as the greatest fraud in the history of publishing. But I keep going. I have to! At this point, I've got no choice. We have a mortgage.

DM: Some writers use social media to broadcast themselves; others use it as a platform for their work, book trailers, and the like. Then there are the YouTube reviews of your books uploaded by your readers, lots of those for *The Last Policeman* series. What should a writer's relationship to social media be?

BW: Social media is great for publicity purposes, of course. The problem with social media is that it is the opposite of real writing. Posts by their nature are short, unedited, inconsequential, and impermanent. A novel, by my lights, is the opposite of all of these things.

What's more, as a writer your goal is to monetize A) your words and B) your focused attention. When you take even five or ten minutes to craft and post a clever status update, you are giving away both of these things. Not only the words themselves (and the intellectual/emotional resources it took to write them), but your focused attention for those five minutes. And then of course, the company, Facebook or Twitter or whomever, what they're selling is "hits." *They* are monetizing *your* attention, *your* words, and selling them to their advertisers. That time, that attention—friend, that is yours! That belongs to you.

DM: What do you enjoy about teaching? Will this be a part of your career going forward?

BW: Just to be hokey about it, it's always a joy to recognize ability in someone else and help them figure out how to use it. That never gets old. And I enjoy getting the chance to remind myself of the basics that I've forgotten. I'm always telling people some fine point of craft, or pointing out some little masterful flourish in a book I like, and then going, *Well heck, why aren't I doing that?*

Also, the narcissist in me admits that I like to talk in front of other people and see them nod and jot down what I say. Of course they could just be playing tic-tac-toe or writing "Ben Winters is full of it" in their margins. I never check.

DM: Does the ghost of Detective Hank Palace from *The Last Policeman* series still lurk in the shadows of your mind?

BW: Oh, sure. That guy, fictional though he may be, changed my life. I taught myself to write writing those books. I will always love Detective Palace. The nice thing is that I set those books in Concord, New Hampshire, because that's where my brother lives, and so I still get back there once or twice a year. I get to walk the streets Hank walks, poke my head into the library where he finds Naomi Eddes's parents in the phone book. I'll always have Concord!

David J. Marsh holds an MFA in creative writing from Butler University. He is seeking an agent to represent his first novel while he begins his second. He lives in Danville, Indiana, with his wife and three children and works as a global manager for a drug development company. Much of his fiction explores Hebrew/Old Testament Biblical narratives. Every two weeks on Wednesday he records what he's learning about the craft of fiction in a column at www.davidjmarsh.wordpress.com