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Matthew Baker

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Abstract

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Depending on whom you ask, Michael Martone is either contemporary literature's most notorious prankster, innovator, or mutineer. In 1988 his AAP membership was briefly revoked after Martone published his first two books—a "prose" collection titled *Alive and Dead in Indiana* and a "poetry" collection titled *Seeing Eye*—which, aside from *Seeing Eye*'s line breaks, were word-for-word identical. His membership to the Society of Scottish Novelists was revoked in 1991 after SSN discovered that, while Martone's registered nom de plume had been "born" in Edinburgh, Martone himself had never even been to Scotland. His AWP membership was revoked in 2007, reinstated in 2008, and revoked again in 2010.

After his first two collections, Martone went on to write *Michael Martone*, a collection of fictional contributor's notes originally published among nonfictional contributor's notes, *The Blue Guide to Indiana*, a collection of travel articles reviewing fictional attractions such as the Trans-Indiana Mayonnaise Pipeline and the Musee de Bob Ross (most of which were, again,originally published as nonfiction), a collection of fictional interviews with his mentor John Barth, fictional advertisements in the margins of

magazines such as *McSweeney's* and *Nashville Review*, poems using the names of nonfictional colleagues, and blurbs for nonexistent books.

But his latest book is perhaps the most revealing—*Racing in Place* is a collection of essays on Martone's obsession with blimps, cattle, and the Indianapolis 500, symbols for him of "this kind of frenetic motion and also this kind of staticness in the Midwest." Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Martone has often been described as a regionalist, and his relationship with the Midwest mirrors his relationship with literature: Martone thinks of the Midwest as a "strange, imaginary place, with no distinct borders or boundaries."

As we both summer in Kokomo, I offered to visit Martone's loft for our interview, but Martone suggested something a bit more complicated. Instead, I wrote each question on a postcard, then left it at one of three drop-off locations: under a park bench at Foster Park, in a steamer trunk at Two Cities Antiques, and at Don's Books in a used copy of an 1897 edition of *The Invisible Man*. Martone then delivered each response on a postcard (or more than one, when necessary) of his own. He insisted on this method —although once I caught him making a drop off at Foster Park and managed to conduct part of our interview face-to-face. I should also mention one of his postcards appeared to be in someone else's handwriting; when I later asked Martone about this, he said his handwriting had just been having "an off day."

From what I've read, your experiments with fiction and nonfiction began long before your career as a writer. In college you and your friends enrolled a fake student, Paul French, and even attended his classes. Paul French went on to graduate, and now even receives alumni mail. What first got you interested in experimenting with those boundaries?

One of my high school friends, Justin Montgomery, moved to Alaska the summer we graduated. He wanted to work on the crab boats—he'd heard you could make a triple-digit salary working as a deckhand for the summer, hauling crabs in from sunrise until sundown and sleeping on the boat.

When he came back at the end of the summer, though, here's what he said had happened. He'd driven a week straight in his pickup, not even stopping to piss, just pissing in a glass jar as he sputtered along the

highway, and then his pickup had died just outside of Nikiski and he'd had to hike his way into town. And once he got there he didn't know anyone and he couldn't get a job on a boat—not on a crab boat, not on a squid boat, not on a clam boat even—and he was sleeping in a hotel and spent all of his money the first two nights he was there.

Part of the problem was that he was shy. He had trouble introducing himself to the captains of these different boats. He'd get nervous when he did, mumble, stammer, give off this aura of general incompetency.

So the thing he decided to do was this: on his second night in Nikiski, he walked up to a couple of men standing outside of his hotel and introduced himself as Jaspar Jinx.

And when he did? No mumbling. He wasn't nervous about what they would think of him, because he was pretending to be someone else. He was pretending to be this fictional person. It wasn't Justin they were meeting—it was only Jasper Jinx.

So he kept doing it. He started telling everybody he met that that's who he was. And a few days later he got a job on a clam boat and sailed off into the Pacific for the summer where his captain turned out to be an alcoholic and a crook and borderline Ahab about these clams. And there was almost a mutiny, but then there wasn't, and so Justin came back to shore with just enough money to buy himself a new pickup and the gasoline to get him home again.

But when he did—when he got home—he insisted that we call him Jaspar. He wanted us to call him Jaspar Jinx. We'd known this kid since he was thirteen—we'd played basketball with him, gone trick-or-treating, built a rope swing in his backyard—and now he wanted us to pretend that he was someone else. He said that he liked who he was when he was Jaspar more than who he was when he was Justin.

So of course we told him, you're full of shit. We're not going to call you that. You'd sound like a DC supervillain. But he *insisted*. He even went out and got his name changed—got it legally changed. His parents convinced him to change only the first name, but still, on his driver's license, now it says Jaspar Montgomery. The rest of our friends kept calling him Justin anyway, mocked him nonstop about the "Jaspar" on his license. But I

thought, huh. Maybe there's something to that. Maybe in some ways he really has changed—really is different from that kid we knew before.

And that's what got you into writing?

I was already writing—I'd been writing stories since middle school. But that incident with Jaspar changed the *way* that I wrote. I'd been taught in school and by my grandmother that fiction was something on a page. But Jaspar showed me that the boundaries weren't where I'd thought they were —that just like we have these fictions on the page, we also have fictions in our lives.

So I decided to make my own alter ego. Which wasn't easy—in fact, it turned out to be almost impossible. I could change my name, or wear an unusual hat, but I couldn't convince *myself* of the fiction. Lyn Hejinian writes about this in *My Life*: "I suppose I had always hoped that, through an act of will and the effort of practice, I might be someone else, might alter my personality and even my appearance, that I might in fact create myself, but instead I found myself trapped in the very character which made such a thought possible and such a wish mine."

I decided to practice by creating a fictional life through letters. I'd met this girl in the Upper Peninsula—my friends and I, during our Jasparless summer, had driven up there to go fishing in Lake Superior. And this girl from Montana had been there visiting her father, and we'd had a weeklong romance and then swapped addresses and she'd taken an airplane back to her mother. We hadn't written yet, so I decided to write her some letters, and through these letters to create a fictional life. I used my own name, of course—she already knew me as Michael Martone. But the Michael Martone I told her about in the letters didn't actually exist. The fictional Michael Martone had an allergy to citrus; he had an affinity for parakeets; he played the clarinet; he had a twin brother who'd died in his mother's womb.

I know that you've written a number of "alter ego" fictions since—those letters were your first attempt at learning that craft?

Yes. Well, actually, no. Now that you've said that, I've just remembered an incident from middle school, which I think was probably my first "alter ego" experience, albeit inadvertently.

What was the "incident"?

In middle school I desperately wanted to fit in, but I didn't stand much of a chance. I had glasses twice the size of my face, and wore XL t-shirts on an XS body, and was taking precalculus classes once a week at a college campus nearby. I played the trumpet in our middle school band, which made things even worse; at our school the trendy thing was choir. I tried out for the seventh grade basketball team and during the free throw drills I made zero out of ten.

One of the popular kids was this guy named Dustin Vanloon. Back then he was Justin's best friend—kids liked referring to them as a duo. You know, "Dustin and Justin." Everyone liked Dustin because he owned a lot of videogames and always made all of his free throws and had a body big enough to actually fill out an XL—he was enormous for a seventh grader. He was on the basketball team and the wrestling team and did competitive powerlifting. I always sat with the popular kids at lunch—none of them had any idea who I was, but they let me hang around anyway—and Dustin made lots of jokes about sexual organs that I didn't even yet know existed. Everything I know about sex I learned from him. That's all it took was a year of his jokes.

But it turns out he was actually pretty depressed, and was on a lot of medication, and then one week he stayed up three days without sleeping. He still came to school, but at night—this is what his parents said later on —he'd just play videogames. I'm not saying the videogames killed him; his parents said he played them all night *because* he couldn't sleep, not vice versa. Anyway, sometime during the third night his heart stopped. His parents found his body in the morning.

That must have been somewhat traumatizing—even if you weren't actually friends.

To some extent it was. But the really traumatizing thing came later. The summer after he died, somehow I suddenly fit in with everyone. My house became the hangout for all of these kids I'd been idolizing since kindergarten. They'd bring over all of these great records I'd never even heard of—The Velvet Underground, *Highway 61 Revisited, Three Imaginary Boys*—and we'd eat sandwiches my grandmother made and play Atari.

Which was actually really good for me. I became more comfortable with myself, less terrified of talking to other humans. I became sort of the mascot of our little group, the clown. I even briefly dated a ninth grader. We never kissed, but we held hands. For me, at the time, that was an enormous victory.

At a certain point, though, sometime during my eighth grade year, I realized what had actually happened. When he had died, Dustin Vanloon had created a vacuum. And I had filled it. I had essentially *become* Dustin Vanloon—I was their new friend-with-videogames, their new friend-with-lots-of-jokes. Because my fashion sense was more or less nonexistent, I even wore the same size t-shirts as Dustin, the same size pants. I had become a sort of fiction. They weren't friends with Michael Martone; they were sustaining their friendship with Dustin Vanloon *through* Michael Martone, using me as their medium. I'm sure they all felt guilty about his dying—I even felt guilty, and like you pointed out, we hadn't even been friends—and the way they coped with it was by being especially nice to this new Dustin Vanloon. When that ninth grade girl held my hand, she was holding it because it was Dustin's. For her, that was the allure. When I realized that, I broke up with her. I didn't date anyone again until I'd graduated high school and gone off to college. I didn't want to be anyone's Dustin.
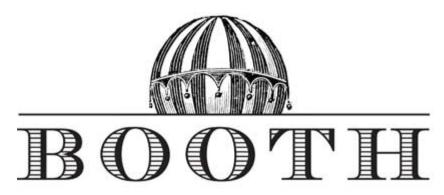
Page 1 of 4 | « Previous | 1 | 2 | 3 | Next »

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ABOUT   ARCHIVES   CONTESTS   PRINT   SUBMIT

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It seems like you later learned to embrace that sort of transformation, though. First with Paul French, and later when Neal Bowers wrote a book called Words for the Taking *about his search for someone who had plagiarized a number of his poems—you then started publishing poems under the name Neal Bowers, essentially donating to his oeuvre instead of stealing from it.*

That's not entirely true, although that is what I told everyone at the time. I'd been planning on doing that, but then my uncle called me one afternoon—I'd just started teaching at Iowa State—and told me my cousin Maddie had written these really lovely poems. I *needed* to read them, he said. So I said, well, okay, send me some. I wasn't exactly thrilled. I knew he was looking for me to validate her poems, to tell him they showed all of this promise I already knew they wouldn't.

But when the poems arrived I was blown away. Not by all of them—most of them were your average eleven-year-old's poetry. A haiku about her dog, a poem about Halloween, an acrostic about Lake Michigan. But three or four of them were, I thought, some of the most brilliant poems I'd ever read. Especially by a middle schooler.

Of course, I knew nobody was going to publish a poem by sixth grader

Maddie Cook, no matter how good it was. As long as her name was attached to them, they were entirely unpublishable. But I was interested in the merits of the poetry itself. So I sent the poems off to a couple magazines with Neal's name attached to them. I thought, if Neal had written them, would they want them? It turns out that they did.

What did your uncle say when he found out?

He didn't. I never told him they were published—I think he would have been upset that I had published them under Neal's name. So I just called him and said, "Look, the poems are okay, but pretty good for an eleven-year-old. Tell her to keep at it."

Have you told anyone this before? Publicly, I mean?

No, but my uncle doesn't read literary magazines, so it doesn't matter. And anyway, I don't consider this "publicly." Most *writers* don't read author interviews, and even if they do they're just sort of skimming. I could say anything here I wanted to and it wouldn't matter.

I know you've written a number of "alter ego" fictions since—Dean Strickland, Ts'ui Pên.

I've begun and abandoned countless alter egos. I'm often worried my unfinished selves will come back for me, for some form of haunting, like in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

Are you the only writer working in the "alter ego" genre, as far as you know?

No. I have a number of contemporaries. And of course it's a very old genre —*The Book of Incandescent Light*, for example, was written in the 17th century.

Have you heard of *The Book of Incandescent Light*? It was published by an Irish writer named Lord Wilmore. Several years after it was written, however, Lord Wilmore announced he was merely a nom de plume—he had agreed to be used as such by another writer, Edmund Busconi. So began the trail of nom de plumes—all actual people—each of whom came out as the "author," one after another—Busconi, then Zaccone, then Picaud, then Maquet, and so on—each of them outing the previously-

supposed-to-be "author" as merely a human nom de plume. This went on into the 18th century—the trail of nom de plumes went eight or nine "authors" deep.

One of my favorite writers in the alter ego genre, though, is Sophie Calle. Calle once asked Paul Auster to invent a fictional character she would "attempt to resemble." So Auster used her as the model for Maria Turner, a character in his novel *Leviathan*. Like Calle, Turner is an artist. But the art that Turner makes in the novel is fictional—it's not based on anything Calle had actually made. One piece was a series of color-coordinated meals, for example—everything on the dinner plate was blue; the next meal, everything on the dinner plate was violet. After the novel was published, Calle then *actually created* the works of art that had been attributed to her "fictional" self in Auster's novel.

I've read that since your mid-twenties you've been at work on a project called The Numberless. *When, if ever, will you publish it?*

I already have. I self-published a hundred copies of *The Numberless*, and those are the only copies of it I'll ever allow to be printed. I'd personally value a copy of *The Numberless* at around $5, but, like any rarity, it's now selling for far more than it's actually worth. Earlier this winter an unsigned copy of *The Numberless* sold on eBay for about $870. I myself have three *signed* copies, which means I own about $4,200 of *The Numberless*. My copies aren't for sale, though.

In another interview you mentioned The Numberless *was an "interactive" story.*

Did you ever play *Dungeons & Dragons*? As a kid I was obsessed with all games—my grandmother taught me mahjong, cribbage, chess, and of course we played the newer games like *LIFE* and *Trouble*—but with *Dungeons & Dragons* it was an obsession far beyond any other.

What was so compelling about it was that it was this narrative game. Other games had this vague sort of narrative attached to them: in *Clue,* you know, each piece is a named character, and you're trying to solve the murder of Mr. Boddy; in *The Settlers of Catan* you're supposed to be building these colonies on the island of Catan. But in *Dungeons & Dragons*, it's not just some vague narrative—the game is *about* the narrative. *The Numberless* is

the opposite of that. It's a game-type narrative. It's interactive, but it's still primarily a story.

Did you publish it under your own name?

No, that one I published under the name Ts'ui Pên.

I've heard you publish your genre novels under a variety of nom de plumes.

Actually, most of my genre work I publish under the same name. My romance novels, urban fantasy, steampunk westerns, those I publish under the name Mark Clements.

When I was working on my horror novel, though, *Kaonashi*, my editor wrote me an email saying she'd discovered "there's someone else already writing abysmal horror novels under the name Mark Clements." So I published *Kaonashi* under the name Andre Huett instead. Clements and Huett are the only ones I've used for genre work, though.

Why "Mark Clements"?

I wanted an anagram for Clark Kent, but even using the "I, Rearrangement Servant," the best anagram I could get was Karl Tenck, and I thought Tenck sounded made-up. So I started adding letters, and rearranging letters, and I ended up with Mark Clements.

You've written a number of essays on the myth of the superhero. I've read that Thomas Pynchon has said he first got you into comics while you two were rooming together in Brooklyn.

No, I was reading comics before that. When I was growing up my uncle owned a shop that sold comics, baseball cards, and Scottish memorabilia. It was attached to his house. Every few weeks I would go over there to spend the night; we'd watch *Star Wars*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Searchers*, eat popsicles from the convenience store across the street. Then the next day I'd help him run his shop. He always paid me in comics. He didn't have to—I was eight years old and thought that just being in his shop was the greatest thing in the world. But he paid me anyway, one or two comics a day. So I ended up with a lot of Batman comics, Superman, the Fantastic Four.

My uncle sold a lot of foreign comics though too—through him I ended up with almost every issue of *Métal Hurlant,* most of *Tintin*, a number of Tezuka's books. He also carried a lot of the underground comics that were just starting to emerge at that time—Spiegelman in *Real Pulp*, Pekar in *American Splendor*.

Speaking of Pynchon, he's also worked in the alter ego genre, but on the *non*fictional side of things. Pynchon claims that in his early thirties he was abducted by aliens—aliens who then replaced him with a changeling, a fake human who assumed the name Thomas Pynchon and then published Pynchon's first novel, *V*. Meanwhile, it was Pynchon's experience onboard the alien spacecraft that inspired most of the material in his second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, which Pynchon published once he'd been returned and had reassumed his identity.

I've heard that Pynchon had published an essay about his abduction in Harper's, *but I haven't actually read it*.

Changelings are in some of our oldest stories—before aliens, it was fairies that would use them. Fairies would abduct a newborn baby, then replace it with an imposter. The way to prevent this was to name the baby—once a baby had been named, the fairies couldn't steal it. It was only the nameless babies they had the power to steal.

The name of this syndrome is Capgras—it's a psychological disorder where one is actually prone to these delusions. You become convinced that someone close to you has been replaced by an identical imposter.

A related syndrome is Cotard syndrome—it's a psychological disorder where one becomes convinced that one has died, or sometimes, rather, that one does not exist.

You've called Neil Gaiman's The Sandman *"a formal initiation of the superhero pantheon into the realm of world mythology." In what sense are superheroes a pantheon?*

In the sense that they were written in the same way as historical mythologies—by a community of storytellers, over a period of generations —and that these sometimes immortal, always superhuman gods share a fictional universe and play a role in each other's stories. We have other

American mythologies—our folktales, our urban legends—but those are isolated myths, trapped in their own fictional universes. They can't intermingle like the gods of an actual pantheon.

I was glad to see our American pantheon recognized in that way in Gaiman's work. I love superheroes and supervillains, the mythology of them—our gods and demigods as masked vigilantes, ruining our cities with their warring.

| Page 2 of 3 | « Previous | 1 | 2 | 3 | Next » |

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What's the origin of the superhero myth, as you see it?

DC and Marvel will often publish "origin stories" for their superheroes—how Bruce Wayne became Batman, how Hal Jordan became the Green Lantern. Sometimes the alter ego is forced onto the superhero by a freak accident, a science experiment gone wrong (similar to Michael becoming Dustin, maybe): Spider-Man, the Hulk, the Fantastic Four. Others, they invent their alter ego to undertake some task. Batman, Iron Man, Green Arrow, they *choose* to become the alter ego (like Justin becoming Jasper).

What about those who are born a superhero? Like Superman?

Or Hellboy, Wonder Woman. Yes, that's the third type. So they're either Mohammed types, Buddha types, or Christ types: in their respective religious traditions, Mohammed became a prophet only after being visited by the angel Gabriel, having lived an ordinary and simple life before; Buddha *chose* to abandon his palace and seek enlightenment after seeing the four signs of age, sickness, death, and monasticism; and Christ was born the "Son of God."

You could argue that the second type is really just a subset of the first type —that Bruce Wayne becomes Batman because of the murder of his parents,

or that Siddharta Guatama became Buddha because of the four signs he saw after escaping the palace. But after the death of Bruce's parents, Bruce still has a choice: he can deal with the death of his parents like a normal human being and go on to live a normal life, or he can transform himself into something savage and have out his revenge every night on the streets of Gotham. With Siddharta, even after the four signs he could have returned to the palace and spent the rest of his life in luxury and affluence, but he abandoned that and went on to transform himself into something mythical—someone who battled demons, performed miracles, associated with the Indian underworld: murderers, untouchables, cannibals. The Spider-Man and Mohammed types, however, are transformed by an outside event—the spider bite grants Peter Parker his powers, whether or not he wants them, and Gabriel grants Mohammed the teachings of the Qur'an, whether or not he's interested in becoming a prophet and starting a world religion. These three types extend beyond religious mythologies, even; other systems of mythology, maybe all, contain these three types of myth.

I suppose you see them in literature, too. Dr. Jekyll becomes Mr. Hyde after a science experiment gone wrong, and spends the rest of the story trying to cope with this thing that he's become; Edmond Dantes chooses to become the Count of Monte Cristo, and through his alter ego wreak havoc upon his enemies; and Frankenstein's monster is created with his terrible abilities, and spends the rest of the story trying to cope with the thing that he is—trying meanwhile to live among the humans, to find some way to blend in, to become a "Clark Kent."

Anyway, the "origin story" is a convention of the genre, so it's interesting to hear you ask about the origins of the myth itself.

Its origins are fairly well established, though. The myth began with the superhero who's since become the most iconic—Superman. It was probably inevitable that the United States would invent its own gods. We were a nation composed almost entirely out of first- or second- or seventh-generation immigrants—we had no historical mythology of our own to supply a pantheon of ready-made gods. The Germans had already revived the spirit of one from their own pantheon, Wotan, for the coming of World War II. So when Superman appeared in 1938, he created this craze in American comics for superhero stories. By the time America entered the war in 1941, the superhero pantheon had already grown to include a number of its most celebrated gods—Batman, the Flash, the Green

Lantern, Captain America.

But those superheroes weren't yet a pantheon. They each existed in a separate imaginary America. It wasn't until the 60's, when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's Marvel superheroes began referencing each other in their comics—and eventually even making guest appearances in each other's stories—that the pantheon came into its own.

Why do you think we've chosen these gods—the superheroes?

Because it's our story. We're not a nation where people live in the same town or village from age zero to ninety—identity here isn't a static thing. Even our stories that aren't about superheroes are about superheroes—or at least alter egos. In Russell Banks' "Sarah Cole: A Type of Love Story," the narrator alternates between referring to himself in the first-person, as an "I," and third-person, as a "he." It's about this distance the narrator feels from who he was; that "he" feels like a separate self from the self he is now. Or in Jesse Ball's "Plainface": when Plainface meets a stranger, he has an ability to assume the identity of one of that stranger's kith or kin, to actually *become* them. When you're looking for it, it's everywhere in our stories: *Infinite Jest*, *East of Eden*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Catch-22*. We're a nation where you can't be who you are forever.

It's surprising you haven't worked with the superhero myth in your own stories, as interested as you are in these questions about identity.

Well, maybe in a certain sense I do work with the myth. Giving my cousin that Neal Bowers costume, for example, so that she could overcome the weakness in her own identity.

And I do have my own alter egos. Paul French, Neal Bowers. Even Michael Martone. I've never really felt much like "Michael Martone"—sometimes I think my entire life I've been wearing a costume. At some point I put it on to cope with things that Michael Martone was too weak to take on as himself. And after a while I forgot I was even wearing the costume. Now I can't take it off. I've forgotten where the zipper is, and I'm stuck in it.

Matthew Baker's online novella Kaleidoscope can be read at www.kaleidoscopeof.com. Baker was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

15