INTERVIEW

ALI ETHERAZ
Ali Eteraz is the author of the debut novel Native Believer, a New York Times Book Review Editors’ Choice selection. He is also the author of the critically acclaimed memoir Children of Dust, which was selected as a New Statesman Book of the Year, won the Nautilus Book Award Gold, and was long-listed for the Asian American Writers Workshop Award. Previously, he wrote the short story collection Falsipedes and Fibsiennes. Other short stories have appeared in The Adirondack Review, storySouth, Chicago Quarterly Review, and Forge Journal. Eteraz is an accomplished essayist and has been spotlighted by Time Magazine and Pageturner, the literary blog of The New Yorker. During his visit to Butler University as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series, Eteraz took the time to speak with Manuscripts staff member Elena DeCook.

You’ve written memoir, short story, and now this novel. What was it like to transition between those forms? What was the biggest surprise for you?

I was already writing novels prior to my first book, which was a memoir, so I kind of knew what went into writing a novel. And given that, when you’re young—well, not everybody, but when I was young—I was writing a lot and just calling it a novel. It was formless stuff. When I finally came to short stories and was like, “Oh my god! Form can control this information dump,” it was actually really liberating. I was like, “man, why didn’t I start with short stories?” But then I went back and I realized that some of the things that I kept throwing into the novel were really just short stories. So, for me, probably the hardest challenge is not really the distinction between novel and memoir: it’s actually the distinction between longer and shorter. That’s where I am not exactly sure where I fall. Sometimes I’m so convinced that I’m really a short form person, even though I’ve got two long-form books, and then only maybe twenty published short stories. I just think, “I’m definitely on the short side; I was never meant to write a novel.” And that might be just because so many of my novels get abandoned. But that doesn’t mean I can’t rehabilitate those into short stories, either, so that’s still something I’m not sure I have a final answer on. The distinction between the size is what ultimately controls my relationship to the form, but I haven’t decided where I’m most comfortable yet.
In terms of the difference between memoir and writing a book of fiction, is there a way that one is more freeing or more restrictive?

I would say that at the time I wrote the memoir, the memoir was the most freeing, but I don’t think I have another memoir in me. Therefore, it’s more restrictive now.

You’ve memoir-ed it all out.

I’ve memoir-ed out what I was capable of memoiring.

You’ve spoken before about your relationship to writing in English versus writing in Urdu or Punjabi, and you’ve also been compared to other bilingual or multilingual writers. How do you think that informs the way you use language? Does it contribute to your mastery of it?

My bilingualism—and what is bilingualism? You speak one language, and then you acquire a new one. At least, that’s how it went for me. I didn’t grow up simultaneously having two. I was in one, I came out [to the U.S.] at the age of eleven, got a new one, and then kept the first one. So that’s how I became bilingual. Some people, they don’t keep the first one. They just get moved into the new language. So for me, the acquisition of English happened by reading books. I didn’t learn English in an academic, formal sense; I learned it by reading a lot. The acquisition of English went through literature. And it’s literature ranging from Dickens to books about elves and science fiction. So it was very broad, in that sense, how I accessed English and how I acquired English. Had that not happened, I don’t think that I would have ended up becoming a writer, because it was the reading of those books that actually made me want to be a writer. And the reading of those English books specifically. So for me, the transition from Urdu to English is why I became a writer.

In a different interview, you mentioned that you admire writing that has very practical moments until it drops something very poetic in the middle, like it gets overwhelmed by itself. Is that something you try to emulate, or do you have a different way to balance language and thought?

That’s a good question. I like to write simply, but I don’t like to plot
simply. For me, plot is about mystery. It’s not about revelation or revealing. Maybe I go in an opposite direction than other people? I’m not sure—people would write more beautifully, but have a simpler plot. I think I would write more simply but have a more annoying plot. That’s kind of what I think I do, but I just want—regardless of what I do—that the access to the characters be earned. I don’t necessarily want to make it easy for the reader; I don’t think they want that. I don’t want to detract them from doing that work by having really complex language. But a little bit of work should be okay. That’s probably what the reader likes.

In terms of that access to the inner lives of characters, and access to what’s going to happen in the rest of the plot, there are moments where you interpret for the reader—the example that comes to mind is M. talking about his relationship to Marie-Anne’s mother. How do you decide what needs to be said on the page and what you want to let the reader find out for themselves?

Well, M. is fucked up because he—well, the book is about believing—not just faith, but what do you believe when people are spouting off? What should you believe, are they accurate, should you believe that their victim story is a victim story? Should you have reliability in what they’re saying? I mean, M. is an unreliable narrator. And he seems reliable. That’s, I think, the problem for the reader with M., that he seems very, very reliable, and I think—you have to tell me this. Is he reliable? Or does he seem unreliable?

To me?

Yeah.

The thing that came to mind for me while I was reading it was a Zadie Smith essay where she talks about a world shaped around your own desires, and I think his is shaped around his fears. It’s interpreted through what he’s afraid of, and the worst coming true.

So I’m sort of curious about that passage, specifically, about the mom, because I remember writing that. By that time, are you already aware that he thinks along this fear-driven way?

I can’t quite remember. I think it was slowly arising.
Slowly arising. Okay, I’m pretty sure I wrote that later, when I knew that he is unreliable; you can’t trust this guy to do the right objective journalism of his life. You can only rely on him to do the “M. is a victim” analysis. That’s why it worked that the reader needed to see what he thinks of his mother-in-law.

*That was something that came up while you were writing the book, this aspect of him as an unreliable narrator?*

The two of them—the husband and wife—they’re always kind of lying, to each other, even. And sometimes they’re conspiring! They have this weirdly imaginative way of thinking about who they are, which seems false, but they believe it. So, what do you believe? We go through that every single day. Do I really believe in my abilities as a writer? Do you really believe in your abilities as a writer? Do I believe that I’m really the person that I am? I think M. does that on a different sort of social, identity-based level—he’ll give these little sermons and monologues about what he thinks is happening in the world, or is being done to him—but is it believable? I think Ali Ansari comes in and tries to show us that this guy’s version of stuff is not always in alignment with what’s actually happening. I think, to some degree, that Candace also realizes that, but M. doesn’t, and his wife doesn’t.

*Another aspect of the book that’s important from the beginning is the geography of it—for instance, he looks out his front window and sees the Rocky statue. Can you talk about how the city of Philadelphia shapes this story and how you decided to set it there?*

Philly is a really walkable city, and I just really thought that—let me back up. In the original-original idea of this book, there was no M. The main character really was a cross between M and the wife. He was involved in this war-on-terror analysis of politics, and think-tank life, and all that, and he just happened to be in Philadelphia and walked around a lot. Then, I realized that there was too much happening with this one person, and I started developing this crazy M. guy, and then it made sense to just keep it in Philly. Especially because of the country getting founded in Philadelphia, and him sort of trying to liken his own extrication from the social problems that he sees—he thinks of himself like he’s
George Washington, but he’s not, right? I wanted to conflate that, for sure. Philadelphia was the right place. It could’ve been D.C. I guess, but I know Philly. It’s tangible, American history. And he wants to make history—wants to have kids, and he wants to lay roots, and he wants to create something going forward. His own little family country. But he’s not able to, and he’s not equipped to. He shouldn’t have children.

*He’s his own founding father.*

And probably should stop right there.

One review of your book described it as “unflinching in its willingness to transgress taboos” (*New York Times*). Has the reaction to that surprised you? Have there been things that people have been more scandalized by that you didn’t expect, or less?

I figured that by the end of the book, because I knew the ending, the stuff that happened along the way would make sense. And I think it does. I think that if there was doubt at some point, even by the end, that this guy is who he is pretending not to be, that you would be able to go back and see what it took for him to be able to get there. In that sense, some of those scenes are breadcrumbs that maybe you don’t see until later. Maybe you think that those are actually mud, or something. Then you reach the end and you’re like, “oh that’s not mud, that’s breadcrumbs. The trail’s back there.” I like to have the opportunity for the reader to reach the end of the journey and then to track back and look for stuff. It’s not like that with every project, but with this one, I felt that more strongly.

*You wanted it to benefit a second, or a third, or a fourth reading?*

Yeah. Or, just that flip back after the first one. I think there’s stuff there, there’s people scattered along the journey, and I don’t name them, but you can kind of pick that up later on, if you’re paying attention. Not to deviate a little bit from the taboo stuff, or anything like that, but the taboo stuff fits if you finally see him in his manifestation. It’s also like Ali Ansari. You initially—at least, in my reading—saw him as like a problem person. He’s the pornographer, and he’s using and exploiting, and his trajectory goes a different way. He’s protective of Candace and upset with what M.’s doing with his life. So, similarly with him, some of those taboos—M.’s
unwillingness to participate in some of the taboo stuff can also be read back and say “oh, Ali Ansari was going in a different direction.”

With parts like with Farkhunda, who’s underage and has these relationships with older men—for you, it’s worth it to show this character’s perspective, and his bias towards the world?

First of all, I definitely wanted to illuminate the fact that, in Pennsylvania, underage is still not what we think is underage. If they haven’t changed the rules, if she’s sixteen and over, if a man says “I thought she was eighteen,” then he’s okay. That’s the rule, and she actually cites that rule in the book. I lived in Philly, and that’s how I know that, and we were shocked when we learned it. There’s a little bit of social realism in there, for me, to just kind of drop that in there. I could have easily made her eighteen or twenty-two or whatever, but I did sixteen, I think, subconsciously, because I remembered that rule and was bothered by it. The fact that we still have it on the books. That should not be the case. I chose sixteen because I thought, “well, I gotta illuminate this one thing.” Maybe it could’ve been illuminated in another way, but now we all know.

In Native Believer, there’s a moment where M. is talking about his cultural influences—that he grew up with The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, and that’s affected who he is as a person and what he’s willing to stand up to. Do you agree with that assessment about cultural influences? If you do, is there an influence that you, as a writer, feel responsible for?

I don’t know if I have such a limited view of influences. I think that we are bigger than our favorite sitcoms. I think that we are able to intake a lot more and process a lot more. Again, with M., it’s him being self-serving. When he’s just like, “the reason that I can’t do the really good act right now is because I watched sitcoms about nerds,” he’s being self-serving. I definitely pay a lot of attention to cultural output. For me, it’s not so much trying to be a cultural influencer, but I definitely want to let myself be influenced by what’s around me. That’s, I think, important; I don’t want to create some sort of ivory-tower elevation of myself, or some sort of abyss for myself, where I’m like “oh, I’m immune to everything.” I’m not immune; I react to the same things that everyone else is feeling. I would like to be a participant in our culture, not, you know, how with Cormac McCarthy and some of these guys, people say “oh, they’re over
there, and they’re doing their own thing.” No one’s doing their own thing.

*Along those lines, there’s some meditating on the idea of cultural pigeon-holing in Native Believer. There’s the idea of secularism not being accessible if you’re from a religion that there’s a cultural bias against. I was wondering if you would talk about that a little bit more.*

If you’re from a particular religious tradition, people are not willing to easily let themselves believe that you’re a secular person. I definitely see that with Muslims. There are people who are non-practicing Muslims, who abide by none of the norms other than, maybe, showing up to a funeral prayer. Their secular identity or worldview is diminished by the allegation, almost, of “hey, but you’re a Muslim.” As if those two things can’t coexist. That dismissal of the non-practicing Muslim is not something that’s endemic only to the West. It happens among Muslims as well, in Muslim-majority countries. A large swath of Muslims just do not practice, and yet their own co-religionists, and also people out here in the West, will pretend like those people don’t exist. And they do. Muslim countries are full of people who, while the Friday prayers are happening, are just going home and having a cold one, or illicit sexual relations, or doing nothing. I think that maybe the word secular is a problem, but irrespective of that, I think we should all be cognizant that out of 1.6 billion people, the pure practitioners of orthodoxy are not as common as we think.

*Another thing that comes up in this book is the idea of commodification, of packaging a person or a relationship or a religion for different audiences. Is that something that you think about a lot, as a writer?*

I think I have to. I don’t like to. I’m just very cognizant of myself not being used as a commodity. I’m not, but it’s a fear that I have. Definitely, within a context where there’s this group of Muslim-Americans all about selling the religion, it was a perfect conversation to have. They’re all salesmen, in some sense of the word. M. starts off in marketing, and his wife is in sales. The other people that he comes across are very concerned with branding, naming themselves in the right way, so that they can sell stuff, whether it’s porn or whatever. For me, that conversation wasn’t so much about that Muslims are doing this; it’s just that we do it across the board. People tell me all the time, “go brand yourself on your Twitter!”*
I’m like “no, I don’t want to, and I don’t have to.” Our society has a commodification problem, and I did definitely want to share how that manifests itself within the Muslim-American experience. How else would you get the opportunity to see the way that Muslims commodify except through art?

There’s some conversation in Native Believer about the comparison between different marginalized groups in the U.S. There’s also a piece on this novel in the Los Angeles Book Review titled “Are Muslims the New Blacks?” What kind of role do you think those comparisons play in conversations about discrimination? Do you think they’re productive?

To a limited extent, they’re productive, but sometimes they actually feel like they’re non-productive. I say that because, if we just keep saying that the next group that’s being marginalized is like one of the previous groups, we’re kind of setting up a fatalism in the system. The system just marginalizes the next group. There always has to be one. And we shouldn’t have that fatalism. We shouldn’t just accept that. The system shouldn’t be marginalizing anybody at all! That should be where we start. So contextualizing the next group as similar to the previous group that has suffered, and that continues to suffer—that’s the other thing. You eliminate the continuation of suffering of the other groups. You’ve handed the baton off to the next group, as if they’re the only sufferers, and we’re good on everybody else. The system is cheating. The system wants us to forget the suffering of the people that’s ongoing, and also wants us to accept that there always will be suffering for somebody. We shouldn’t accept that on either account.

You’ve talked about how your book of short stories, Falsipidies and Fibsiennes—which was more surrealist, fantasy, drawing on mythology—was important to your development as a writer. How do you think it affected this book or the writing that you’re doing right now?

I’ve struggled, to be honest, between wanting to be a realist writer or a fabulist writer. I totally have uncertainty. Because I had already started working on Native Believer, and I was in a very real book—tangible places and things like that—and then I was also working on a lot of surreal stuff, I wasn’t sure where I was going to end up. To be honest, I’m still not sure. I feel lucky that I was able to get published at all, and that
I was able to get different types of stuff published, so now I can kind of think through that commitment. Am I going to commit to surrealist, fabulist stuff? Am I going to commit to realist stuff, or am I just going to play it by project? And that’s something I don’t know the answer to yet.

Finally, you said that you never mentioned the Eagles in this book because you were still hurting from the last Super Bowl loss. How do you feel about that—

I feel so good. It was terrible in 2004. So bad. We lost, and President Bush got re-elected. That was the worst. But this was good.