

So American: A Short Story Collection

Sydney Benjamin, 2019

I set out this summer to write a collection of short stories ideologically inspired by the literature of post-Civil-War Realism, and focused thematically on exploring the question of what it means to be an American in this version of America that is fractured along political, social, economic, and geographic lines.

To this end, I travelled to Seattle, WA, Montpelier, VT, and Honolulu, HI (all areas of the country linked together by their ties to secessionist movements – movements which capitalize on the notion of a fractured nation) as well as various locations in Colorado, California, Massachusetts, and New York, in order to interact with the vastly different ways in which Americans around the country conceptualize “America” and American identity. By the end of the summer, I wanted to have a first draft manuscript of a short story collection of approximately seven stories.

During my trip to Seattle in early June, I very quickly realized that my thematic concept was far too ambitious an undertaking – the specific kind of American identity (and the variations and nuances therein) that exists in a given location is not the kind of thing that can be understood in a week (or maybe even an entire summer). My original goal in each of my locations was to figure out what pieces of American identity a person from that location might wish to claim or distance themselves from; I am no longer convinced that American identity exists in such a cohesive fashion. Rather, I have started to believe that American identity is defined by difference and individualism, by the ability to *not* be unified or pre-defined in any way. There is immense freedom in that definition, in that every individual gets to determine what America means to them, but also a heavy and potentially lonely burden to bear, in that no piece of American identity is simply handed to its citizens.

Guided by this new concept, my short story collection gained new shape and focus. I decided to base my stories around the apocalypse, and to focus more strongly on the individual needs and desires of my characters – what really matters to individuals when the future looks bleak at best? This felt both directly resonant with the current state of our nation and more in line with my own interests and capabilities as a storyteller.

The writing process itself also wound up being much slower and more tedious than I had anticipated; while I sped through the first two stories, my process quickly slowed as I had to continue to develop new characters and narratives. I wound up getting through five stories this summer – with two more outlined, to be completed in the fall – all set in the same post-apocalyptic America. The stories are linked by a second-person narrator, a girl who lived through the toxic death wave and is now travelling the country in an old jet plane, collecting the stories of survivors. As the collection progresses, we learn that humanity’s hope for survival is slim to none, and that this narrator is not collecting stories for posterity’s sake, but simply for the creative act of storytelling itself, and for the ability that stories have to explore the truth of individuals’ unique identities and experiences.

While the ultimate goal of this collection shifted quite a bit over the course of the summer, I think that these shifts are a crucial part of the creative process, and have taught me an invaluable amount about my craft and about myself in relation to my own work. This collection will turn into my honors project in the fall, as well as becoming a crucial part of my applications to MFA programs. I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity, and for the amazing amount of personal and creative growth I have been able to achieve as a result.

Faculty Mentor: Brock Clarke

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