

Interview with Zachary Lazar

Zachary Lazar is the author of three books, most recently the novel Sway and the memoir Evening's Empire: The Story of My Father's Murder. His writing has appeared in the New York Times Magazine, the Los Angeles Times, Newsday, and elsewhere. He is an assistant professor at Tulane University.

Tulane Review: *What does the contemporary fiction world look like right now? How do you fit into it in terms of style, voice, etc?*

Zachary Lazar: During his Q and A here at Tulane, Jonthan Franzen said that contemporary American fiction has a certain goofiness to it and I would agree with that. By “goofiness,” I mean a tendency toward absurdism and heavily ironic humor. My own writing is meant to be a deliberate counter move against this. I am not ironic, at least not in that way. I’m interested in dramatic intensity, in raw human emotion, and in the quality of a writer’s mind behind the words.

TR: *Has teaching changed your perspective on writing? Do you find yourself valuing one element (plot, character, etc) more than another?*

ZL: Teaching has made me more conscious about the various aspects of craft, but understanding the aspects of craft is only somewhat useful. It’s kind of like reading a manual on how to fly a plane: it doesn’t prepare you to actually fly a plane. As far as elements go, I am so much a language and character person by nature that I don’t think about those things at all anymore. I think about plot and story all the time. I struggle with making a story, whereas I’ve learned that if I get myself on track in that sense then the language takes care of itself.

TR: *How do you go about constructing a narrative? Do you have a character first or a plot? A scene? Is there a difference in your own method between writing shorter pieces and longer ones?*

ZL: In general, both short and long, I like to lash things together that at first seem unrelated and then explore why they might be related. It’s sort of a

collage approach. With a novel, I plan the whole thing out, then write until the plan breaks down, then plan it out again, then write until the plan breaks down, etc. It's important for me to believe that I know where I'm going, even though I don't know where I'm going.

TR: *Are there any up-and-coming writers that we should be aware of? Who and for what reason?*

ZL: Too many to name. I will name one, Rachel Kushner, whose novel *Telex to Cuba* is a recent favorite of mine.

TR: *Where do you see your own writing in two years? Five? Ten? Are there certain things that have changed your writing in the past or inspired you in different ways? If so, are those changes hard to resist or do you like the evolution? Do you have any goals in terms of your own writing?*

ZL: I am on the third book of what I now see as a kind of loose trilogy of books. They all explore crime in one way or another, and they all blend fiction and nonfiction. I think after I finish this one, which is about Jews and violence (not only victims of it but perpetrators of it), it will be time to start a new and different body of work. One of the things I've let slide in these books is humor. There's some humor, but not a lot. It's the trade-off I've had to make in order to get a certain level of intensity in the prose. But I'd like to find a way to reintroduce humor into my work. It's important. Shakespeare can be very funny and very dramatic at the same time. In *Anthony and Cleopatra*, when Cleopatra kills herself, there's a clown making these incredibly coarse sex jokes that are in such bad taste you have to laugh, and at the same time Cleopatra is giving this beautiful speech about how she feels about dying, and that part breaks your heart.