

## **The UP English Department Newsletter Presents: An Interview with Jess Walter**

*In preparation for his visit to the University of Portland campus, Lilly Grey Rudge met virtually with Schoenfeldt Distinguished Writer Jess Walter to discuss his collection, The Angel of Rome, his thoughts on the world of writing and publishing, and the intersection between climate change and Johnny Cash.*

### **LGR**

Before diving into your collection, *The Angel of Rome*, I would first love to talk about the idea of writing, of “being a writer”. Having authors such as yourself visit the University of Portland is an amazing source of learning and inspiration for those of us who are passionate readers and aspiring writers. At this point in early adulthood, it can feel a little daunting to self identify as a writer, and there is often the question of when one can truly do so. So I am curious, how long have you been writing? And do you remember the first time in your life that you self identified as a writer?

### **JW**

I think when we're kids, we have things that we gravitate toward because we love them, and we have things we gravitate toward because we're good at them. And there are moments when those things intersect. Even as a ten year old, when you get a writing assignment in school and you realize this seems easier for me than it is for other people. And then I just loved books. I can remember carrying around books like they were my best friends and feeling so moved and changed by them. And I think that's the same whether it's a movie or comic book. If you are moved by some piece of written art like that, then it becomes pretty special. So for me, I began editing a magazine in my family when I was eight or nine years old. I was drawing flip books on the corners of my notebooks in school and pressing *A Wrinkle In Time* into other people's hands, saying ‘you have to read this’, and *Treasure Island* and all the books that I loved. So I think I've felt like I wanted to be a writer forever. The hard thing is when that starts becoming: What career is that? Do I become a technical writer because that makes more money? Do I write for television? For me, my path was through journalism, partly because I am a first generation college student and the first male in my family to graduate high school. So the thought of getting a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing was sort of beyond my ambitions at that time. But becoming a journalist was a great path for me. One of the things I loved about newspaper journalism when I was coming into it was that you could get your chops. It was like being a piano player in a bar. You were playing jangly piano super fast, but you could at least learn how to do it. But there was a certain point when I had to admit to some of my journalism colleagues that what I really wanted to do was write novels. And that is a difficult thing. One of the things I'll talk about when I visit the university is the idea of not being afraid of your own ambition, and not being afraid to dream of things. It's really rare to have a career that you do because you feel

so connected to it personally. So I think we have to not be afraid to aspire. Living in Spokane, Washington, all those years, I was sort of outside the mainstream of the literary world, and in some ways it was an easier place for me to aspire like that. But thirteen is the first time I remember imagining where my books would go on the shelf one day, and it's been that path ever since.

### **LGR**

I definitely think you hit the nail on the head about not being afraid to aspire for things, because I do think that is a common fear.

### **JW**

And being a great writer will help you. You could become a banker, and being a good writer helps you. You could become a politician. You could become just about anything and being a great writer helps you. The one thing to not do while you're becoming a writer is stress too much about that. Becoming a novelist takes a great deal of time. Becoming a screenwriter can take a great deal of time. But in the meantime, there are things you can do, steps you can take along that path.

### **LGR**

You've brought up your path through journalism, and I remember reading that you are also a screenwriter, you've taught creative writing and of course you write long form fiction. Different forms and genres of storytelling are intriguing in different ways. When I was reading the title story of the collection, "The Angel of Rome", I kept thinking about what a cinematic piece it is, because it wades into the world of Italian cinema. How do you decide what genre of storytelling to use when expressing a specific story? For example, why choose to have "The Angel of Rome" be a short story rather than a screenplay, long form fiction or something else?

### **JW**

That's such an interesting question. And you're right, I do bounce around in genre. Even when I'm writing fiction. I've written crime fiction, sometimes I'll think, 'this feels like a mystery.' Every writer works differently. A lot of writers, I think, are more wedded to certain genres. But when I come up with an idea, the idea seems more important to me than the writer, even. And when I start writing, I think I start to envision what the thing is. When I started "The Angel of Rome" - an almost novella, it's a very long short story - I really wasn't sure until I could almost see the shape of it. And that shape, to me, sort of demanded a long short story. But I almost never know when I start out. I start out with an idea, a sentence, a character, sometimes a line. One thing I really try to do when I'm writing is think like a musician. Just hear the notes and let them take me where they're going to take me. It's probably not the most efficient way to work, and it's not the way I worked when I was younger. When I was younger, I outlined more, just to make sure I got things done. But now I think one of the things I love is allowing a story to dictate its

own form. And I think it's freed me up as a writer, too. Not everything has to be a novel or a story. The amazing amount of patience it takes to form a piece and pull it together really goes against the culture. Right now, the culture is immediate. And one of the things I love is that I'm composing fiction kind of the way Cervantes did, kind of the way Virginia Woolf did, kind of the way everyone has to. You have to slow down and listen to the thing that you're creating. And when I listen to it, it often tells me if it wants to be a two page short story. Or if an idea just keeps opening up and these characters want to live with me for a few years.

## **LGR**

That is something that I really appreciate about the pacing of this book. There are longer stories like “The Angel of Rome” and “The Way the World Ends”, but then there are much shorter ones such as “Across the Woods”. That pacing was really nice and it all felt natural, so I was so curious to hear about how you crafted that.

## **JW**

It's really fun putting a story collection together. It's the closest I'll ever feel to a musician. It's like putting an album together and thinking, ‘I want to start off with a strong story that sort of sets the tone that this is a collection about characters like Mr. Voice, who are unlikely angels, who are unlikely people stepping up when other characters need them.’ Or thinking, ‘I want this bigger story right in the middle, right before side two of the album.’ So that part is fun. I think I had about 50 stories that I had published since my last collection, *We Live in Water*, that I had to choose from. That was one of the hardest parts, leaving stories behind that I thought were good. And so I tried to read the collection the way a reader would, to think about what feelings I might want to get across to people next and how the characters relate to each other. It's a completely inexact science, but it's one of my favorite things, thinking about how these stories fit together.

## **LGR**

I definitely want to ask you about your characters, because they're all so different. There are preteen and teen girls, 40 year old men, much older characters, and all of them are from very different walks of life. There is common conversation occurring in classes and in the world at large surrounding depictions of identity and lived experience. As a reader, even though many of these characters in this collection vary greatly in aspects of their identity, they still read as very truthful. So I am curious, how do you go about writing a character who might not share your identity?

## **JW**

Having taught fiction, I've had those conversations with writers. In many ways, some of these stories I wrote in order to reinforce the idea that our shared humanity is more vital than our individual differences. I think there's more connective tissue than we imagine. I have never been a young woman suffering from cancer (such as the protagonist of “Drafting”), but my mom died

of cancer and I nursed her through her last months, so I've seen cancer treatment. I have daughters and a wife, and I would show them a story like that and ask if they saw any red flags. And they would tell me if I captured the character in a way that they believed her. There is always a possibility that a reader might read it and think, 'No, that doesn't feel right', but there's no way to always get it right. But I think your job as a fiction writer is to walk through the world with a sort of empathy that you can then apply on the page. For that story "Drafting", I was driving along on the freeway and I saw two cars drafting, one behind the other. And I thought, 'Why would someone do that? Why are they conserving gas driving up this hill?' And I was thinking about my mom and her last days and how difficult they were. And I remember thinking, 'I wonder if at that point, you wouldn't want the obvious people, but you'd want the least likely person in your life to lurch you back into living.' And there's a moment in that story when the protagonist says that she looked at her life as this line, and the only parts that seemed interesting were the jagged parts. And there are moments like that, when you come so close to characters that you think that you might have felt that way if you were that character. You don't share the external things, but you might have felt that way. It is also important, given this very important dialogue about representation and about identity, that I also say that as a fiction writer you owe it to people — your fiction — within a representative world. Not everyone is going to look like me. And so to have a whole story collection where it's just fifty-eight year old men going through problems, to me would be so boring. I want a bigger, more vibrant fictional world. And so it's important to me to at least try to capture the humanity of characters who may not look or sound or be very much like me.

## **LGR**

I think that is what makes the stories even more impactful: The diversity of experience, but then how they all come together to create this very human experience.

## **JW**

One thing I love is when I intersect with a character in what they want or what they're afraid of. They are these points of intersection that become so interesting to write. I was writing once about a criminal who was sitting on a park bench outside of NYU and wondering what all those kids have that he doesn't. And I still think of it as the most nakedly autobiographical thing I've ever written. And I've never been a criminal and I've never lived in New York. So it's not those external things. It's the longings, desires, fears, biases that we all have inside of us that I think the fiction writer is trying to capture.

## **LGR**

Mining into those experiences can be really difficult. A lot of the writing and literature classes that I've been in, we talk about the struggle of how one can accurately represent a variety of experiences. I was really thinking about this when I was reading your story "The Way the World Ends", because it is both hilarious and also really informative. Reading it, I felt simultaneously

so depressed and so happy at the same time, which is a very hard balancing act. I am curious if there were any stories in this collection that you felt were a distinct challenge to write?

JW

The funny thing is, everything is so hard to write because you haven't written it yet. And I always thought that when I became a novelist, by my third novel I'd have it figured out. But you haven't written that novel. You've written a novel that almost does you no good. And these stories can be the same way, too. The one you mentioned, "The Way the World Ends", the assignment was to write a kind of apocalyptic climate fiction. It was a sort of writing prompt. And I'm the sort of student that whatever assignment you give me, I turn it on its head. So I thought, 'I'm going to give it the trappings of a horror or disaster movie, with headlines that scream the end of the world. And even the title. But then I'm going to write about people.' I had done a lot of research. I tried to write a television show about climate change about seven or eight years ago with another writer, and no one wanted it. It was a comedy, but it was just too dark, and like a lot of people they just didn't want to admit the state we were in. But in that research, I had interviewed and come across climate scientists who talked about "pre-traumatic stress disorder", that they felt like they were going around waving their arms, saying, "We're destroying humanity's chance on this planet if we're not careful" And whenever you're writing a character, you're not writing your views. Some people think that story is didactic, or that I'm being overly political. I'm just telling you how climate scientists feel. That story is no different in its creation of character than "Mr. Voice". That was Tanya's reality, and this is the scientists' reality. So in creating a story like that, you're balancing so many different things. I didn't want it to feel like you were just getting all this information, but the information is really important. I often give myself two or three parameters like that. I'm going to make this seem like a disaster movie from the outside, but it's really going to be about these characters and I'm going to make it a three-hander. There's going to be two scientists and the person at this desk at Mississippi State University. Solving all of those character issues and having it be the story that you envisioned was difficult. In some ways that story felt almost as difficult as a novel because of all the different things I had. And then you'll get these wild ideas, like 'I think I need Johnny Cash in that story.' And again, in some ways there's a certain randomness to the way your mind connects these things. But when you pull it all together, you see why those connections were made. Some of the other stories were difficult in balancing different emotions. But in the end, a funny thing happens when you finish a story: You forget how difficult it was. I think anything that's worthwhile, the result makes all the hard work kind of just seem like that was the point. The process becomes exciting, to solve all of those little technical issues and to resolve character things. In many ways that might have been the toughest story to write, but by the end it was one of my favorites. And if you have a story called "The Way the World Ends", you kind of have to end your collection with it. The very first word in the collection is "Mother", from "Mr. Voice". "Mother was a stunner." And the very last word of that same story is "Father". And the very last

word in this collection is “hope”. And for me, if there's any sort of message that these stories contain, I hope it's a kind of hopefulness alongside the humor.

**LGR**

As I read, I kept finding myself flipping to the back of the book to read the acknowledgments, which included where each of the stories first appeared. I think it's so interesting to see what year each story was originally published and what journals and other institutions they were published through. Publishing is a very mystifying kind of daunting thing.

**JW**

For me too.

**LGR**

I know you talked about coming into writing professionally through journalism, and I am curious what you would consider to be your first big published piece of writing?

**JW**

I was writing journalism in high school. I was the editor of my high school newspaper, and I wrote a column about being a benchwarmer on the basketball team. I was always writing and publishing in that form. In college I was a journalism major and a creative writing and English minor. And I did always dream of writing books. I started my first novel in college, and I guess I finished my first novel, although it's so terrible I don't know if it's actually finished. It's in my garage somewhere. I did start sending out short stories to magazines and journals, and there's a whole world of literary journals that exist in print and online where you can begin to publish. The very first story I published was in a journal called Yawp — the Whitman-esque “yawp” is what it's meant to signify — and that was really rewarding. I also remember the very first check I ever got for writing fiction, which was \$25. It was for a contest that Story Magazine ran, and they had 7000 entries, and I finished in the top 25. I was 25th and I paid \$15 to enter the contest, and I got \$25 back. I'd been writing fiction for about seven years at that point and sending out stories. And I thought, so in seven years, I've made a gross of \$25, but a net of \$10 because I had to pay \$15 to get into the contest. And I remember thinking, ‘That's totally worth it’. I've had so much fun writing fiction, learning to write fiction, reading as a fiction writer. I also thought that this was going to be the first. I thought, ‘I'll bet I'll get more checks than this.’ But that first check for writing fiction, I didn't even cash it. I put it up on my bulletin board and put a thumbtack through it and said, “Well, now you're a professional.” And even though I'd published quite a bit of journalism, it was such a dream for me to write fiction. But by then I had success as a journalist. I was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize along with a team of reporters that I worked with. Writing is so moment by moment, day by day improving your craft, that you just keep moving forward. And a novel, of course, is all of those things. All of those day by day decisions and triumphs rolled into this one large thing. If I look back, probably the things that I remember the

most are that first short story being published in 1991, and then my first book coming out in 1995, which was nonfiction. And then my first novel coming out in 2000. And if I can look at those steps, they seem to have made some sense in hindsight. That's the amazing thing about writing: There's always milestones to come. And I think you have to celebrate every one, and you have to celebrate a finished draft. And if you're in a writing workshop, celebrate people liking something you did. I used to celebrate my rejection letters because they would say, "This is well written", and they don't have to tell you that in a rejection letter. Each one of those things was this little bit of encouragement that you sometimes need along the way.

**LGR**

Absolutely. And learning to celebrate criticism because it means someone's giving you the time of day.

**JW**

Yeah. I can remember my first time in an undergrad workshop, and I thought my face was on fire. The attention of people reading your work and the embarrassment of thinking, 'Have I misused a word? Or are they going to realize I know nothing about submarine warfare or whatever I've chosen to write about?' Some of that doesn't go away. I think as writers, we have a combination of being introverts and extroverts. We are either the most introverted extroverts or the most extroverted introverts. We want attention for this thing we've created, but maybe it's harder for us to take it on ourselves.

**LGR**

You have taught graduate level creative writing, and many of the students that you will be meeting during your visit are currently in writing or literature classes. As someone who has taught classes such as those, if you could offer one piece of advice or knowledge to a group of these students, what would you say?

**JW**

When I was young, I stalked Kurt Vonnegut. He was one of my favorites. There are a million writers whose work inspires me. And I think that in many ways the place to start is to remember what inspired you, because I guarantee it is a piece of writing. I tell writers to make a list of their top ten authors, and then if you were ever forced to start a religion, circle the three that mean the most to you and they might be your trinity. And within there you'll often find the style that you're drawn to. For me, for the longest time, it was Kurt Vonnegut, Joan Didion and Don DeLillo, and my work can ping pong around there sometimes. So I think it is to constantly be reading and to draw inspiration from that reading. To emulate those writers that made you want to be a writer, that made you feel less alone in the world, that told stories that captivated you. Oftentimes we can forget where our creativity lives, where our belief in ourselves lives, or where our desire to even do this thing lives. And it lives in those books. Go back to them, read them again, or read new books. Constantly be on the lookout for more inspiration. To be a writer is to be a reader,

and we have to always remember that. The other thing I would say if I'm giving really practical advice is to turn off your phone. Find the most quiet place, put on music that makes you feel creative and touches your soul in some way, and then disconnect from the world. Because I think it would have been much harder for me to come into being a writer now than when I started, because it was so much easier to disconnect. I find it really important to just focus on the thing I'm doing, even if it's only for a few hours a week. And that's how you start to build yourself as a writer. But I think reading for inspiration and drawing yourself there. And then I suppose the third thing is just the amount of resolve and patience with yourself that you have to have. You're going to write terrible sentences and each one of those terrible sentences is the first cobblestone toward something great. So you have to have patience with yourself as a writer too.

### **LGR**

That is all incredible advice, I am going to have to go make that list immediately. But before I do that, I would also love to ask about the regionalism in your writing. As someone from Washington State, I love the fact that most of your writing is set in the Pacific Northwest.

### **JW**

It's funny. When I was starting out as a writer, I thought I had to go elsewhere to write stories. Some of the first things I tried to write were about places I'd never even been. My first novel, which I never published, is set in New York. I'd never even been to New York. And there was a moment when I was traveling and I came back home — and when you travel, you see the world with these fresh, vibrant eyes — and I thought, 'I'm going to see Spokane and the Northwest through those same eyes.' It changed my writing completely. I came to realize the Northwest is one of those great undiscovered territories for fiction writers. There are some amazing writers who come from here, but there isn't a literary tradition like there is in the south or the Northeast. So I think in many ways, this is such a great place to write about. My last collection, *We Live in Water*, has a couple stories set in Portland, including one that has my very favorite first line, which is profane. The very first line of the story is "I fucking hate Portland." I remember that writing that line made me laugh so hard, and it made me think, who is this character? And then it turned out to be a con man who was running a greenpeace scam. It turned out to be such a fun story to write. But I think of myself as having two home bases, the Northwest and Italy, weirdly enough. And so those are, in many ways, my favorite places to write about.

### **LGR**

I got really excited when I was reading your story *Town and Country*, and the character Jay says that he went to the University of Portland. We got a shout-out!

### **JW**

Well, I knew I'd be speaking there someday.



**LGR**

And we are so excited to have you here. Jess, thank you so much for making the time to chat with me today.

**JW**

Thank you so much.

*Hear more from Jess Walter, Schoenfeldt Distinguished Writer and author of ten books, on Wednesday, November 1st, 7:30pm in the BC Auditorium. For ADA accommodations or any questions, please contact the English Department at 503.943.7849.*