

A BSB Interview With John Caruso

by Connie Ward, Bold Strokes Books Consulting Publicist

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What made you decide to become a fiction writer?

Reading stories as a child. It happened rather suddenly in the second half of fourth grade. It seemed like the material took a leap forward from somewhat childish, silly stories to more complex and satisfying ones. That year I'd also moved up to the top-level reading class and I had a homeroom teacher who read to us after recess in the afternoons—books that stayed with me, like *Charlotte's Web*. Things just came together that year and reading became important to me. The first author I read voraciously was William Penn Dubois. I became enthralled with *The Alligator Case* (which was in our fourth-grade reader), then I read everything of his my library had. After reading *The Three Policemen*, I wrote my first short story. Of course, I didn't know the first thing about telling a story, but I knew that one day I would.

What type of stories do you write? And why?

I gravitate toward mythological subjects and magical worlds that are strongly grounded in realism. The author that most influenced me in this was Natalie Babbitt. *Goody Hall* recasts the Hercules legend at a small town manor (something I didn't realize until many years later), while most of her middle-grade novels involve more or less original myths and legends, all with deeper meanings embedded in the stories. *Tuck Everlasting* may be the greatest children's book ever written. I have been just as moved re-reading it as an adult as I was when I first read it at age thirteen. Her stories contain several elements that embody the whole joy of the reading experience for me: they are atmospheric and magical, inhabited by original and memorable characters, suspenseful and emotionally cathartic, full of human wisdom, and each combines the unraveling of a mystery with that of a profound philosophical question. For me, myth is a powerful medium because it allows me to create metaphoric parallels between vastly different worlds of human experience. So instead of trying to make a novel externally complex through a multiplicity of plots, or including vast catalogs of esoteric knowledge that try to mimic the complexity of the modern world, I create internal complexity by finding a single fictional world that suggests by analogy a whole cluster of parallel experiences. It's kind of like finding a really rich motif in music out of which an entire symphony may grow.

What do your family/friends think about your writing?

They are all very excited and enthusiastic about the novel. Of course, I don't know what they'll think once they read it.

What makes *Lightbearer* special to you?

Several things. For one, it was the product of genuine life experience, but also the vision of *Lightbearer*, what I had to know and learn to transcend the limitations of subjective experience, came out of the creative process itself. In following it faithfully and remaining true to the dream of fiction I'd begun, I made discoveries and connections through these fictional lives that I could never have made outside of that process. The process changed me and made me a far better writer than I was at the outset. Part of why that happened resulted from my having chosen a challenging and ambitious subject in the first place. To fulfill the hope of my imagination, I had to go beyond myself.

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Where do you get your ideas?

A lot of my ideas come out of my personal interests—plants, butterflies, dreams, death, music, men, sex, religion, science, desire, social systems—which wind up being influenced by and filtered through my environment. I'm very attached to place, and I think any atmospheric fiction conveys that love. I also find that people—the way they live, survive and adapt to the world—suggest possible fictional communities I'd like to write about. I get a lot of ideas this way that never amount to anything. When I write stories, my mind is always spinning scenarios out of a character or a place whose charm briefly infatuates me. The ones that actually move me to write them down are those that embody some kind of existential conflict I'm going through or have been through, even something going on in the world (it could be an odd story in the newspaper) that drives me to speculate about it. And if something really takes hold of me, I begin to imagine a way to dramatize my absorption until it becomes a vision.

What makes ideas original is how you combine your peculiar fascinations, how you make it something nobody else could have written. Experience and knowledge are kind of my foundation, and when I launch from that foundation into some new fascination without knowing where it will lead, I am much more likely to write something that has a strong original streak. To write really good fiction you have to bring to it everything that you know, either from experience or research, and then be willing to risk it, dismantle it even, in the pursuit of finding out what is true. You have to know and not know in the process to move beyond yourself. It's not that there is one truth, but there are true discoveries.

How do you write; do you plan everything out or just write?

I have done it both ways and have found that I can pull off a short story or a few chapters of a book without a plan, but when it comes to writing a novel, I have to compose a scenario or I'll get stuck. This involves a prewriting stage, which includes some philosophical free-writing about the nature of the conflicts and themes, some biographical or personal information about characters and relationships, and some bits and pieces of plot unfolding. Eventually I get enough bits of plot, enough of a framework of the action and movement of the characters that I'm able to order some scenes. Out of this ordering a kind of shape will suggest itself. Once I begin writing the actual scenes, the going is slower and involves deep visualization. For me it is a slow process because it involves seeing and communicating honestly and clearly. It means finding fresh images and metaphors instead of reaching for familiar phrases and clichés. I guess you could say that clear and honest communication will inevitably lead to an original result because it rejects what is false, formulaic, and derivative. Some writers think originality is about trying some strange technical or formal stunt. They wrack their brains for an original conceit to hang their novels on, but end up writing something that is false and forced. I think this happens because the motivation (to be original) is ego driven, and once a false conceit has a hold of a novel it becomes an end in itself and more important than the process of finding out.

How much of yourself and the people you know are in your characters?

Whatever influences come to bear on the characters, the story itself for that matter, the thing I hope for is that I am working with enough freedom and openness for the original impulses of my fiction to be radically transformed in the process, so that all the elements become independent and take on a life of their own. If you set about making a replica of life, you'll likely end up with something stiff and dead.

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Which lesbian and gay authors inspired you the most? Do you have a favorite of this author(s)?

Going back to my theme of children's authors (many of whom have had the most lasting influence on me) I have to mention Louise Fitzhugh. *Harriet the Spy* is simply one of the most original and distinctive books I read growing up. It was way ahead of its time. Speaking of ahead of her time, Virginia Woolf had a singular vision of what a novel could be. What I admire most and have taken to heart is that each of her novels has a completely different structure. She was constantly evolving and finding new ways of presenting and exploring what it means to be alive. I don't know if Eudora Welty counts, given that she never wished to talk about her private life, but I have to include her. I first read her when I was working on a short-story collection for an undergrad thesis. Because my stories involved myth-making, a professor suggested I read *The Golden Apples*. The story *June Recital* had a tremendous impact on me. The confrontation between the piano teacher and her student is one of the most fascinating and compelling things I have ever read in my life. That element of confrontation is for me one of the most essential in good fiction, and that story showed me anew why it is I love to read and write.

I have a really deep admiration for Herman Melville. I love *Benito Cereno*. The atmosphere has a strange undercurrent of menace, like the hum of a malfunctioning machine that escapes notice until it is about to explode. And the racial themes are way ahead of their time. I think the darkness and seriousness of Melville's vision was not in keeping with his times. Not that the romantics weren't dark, but even a story like *Wuthering Heights* is undergirded by a Christian morality of expiation and redemption. The morality in *Moby Dick* is decidedly unchristian, and Melville knew it when he said to Hawthorne, "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb." That is exactly how I felt when I wrote *Lightbearer*, which directly confronts the Christian myth. Jennifer Knight, my editor, said because of that there probably wasn't a major publisher in the US who would touch it. Thank you, Bold Strokes!

Do you have any suggestions for new writers?

Writing is no more or less important than anything else you choose to do in this life. If you are inclined to make room for other things, go ahead and don't feel conflicted about it. Having a balanced life will only enrich your writing.

When you're not writing what do you do for fun?

Sipping coffee and doing the crossword with my lover. Summer dips in the brook. I love good TV. *Deadwood* and *The Wire* were two of the best shows ever. Now, I think *Dexter* is the best show going. In the summer I garden (raising flowers and veggies) and in the winter I plan the gardens as obsessively as I plan a novel: constantly re-drawing the plan and revising it. I read novels selectively because I don't have the time to read I had as a student, and occasionally I draw pictures (including the cover art for *Lightbearer*).



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