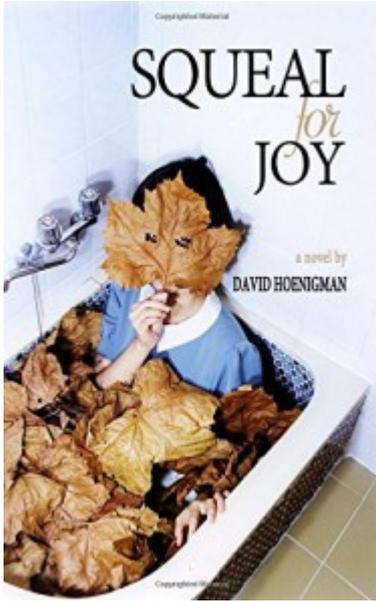


Squeal For Joy: Christopher Lyke Interviews David Hoenigman

written by Guest Contributor | January 29, 2016



College roommates and longtime friends, the writers David Hoenigman and Christopher Lyke conducted an interview discussing some of the ghosts and ideas lurking around in Hoenigman's latest book, [Squeal for Joy](#). According to Lyke, "[Squeal for Joy](#), and its predecessor, [Burn Your Belongings](#) went a long way in freeing my own writing from its moorings. It doesn't look the same, but the honesty, and the scope, and David's ability to place his characters in any world he'd like has led me to the realization that, in writing, we're accountable only to ourselves and that, if what you're talking about is honest, nothing else matters." Hoenigman's ideas on the universality of human behavior, using self-made video to inspire writing, and the power of place on the work one creates are fleshed out in the interview.

Christopher Lyke: I think an artist's surroundings affect not only the subject matter but the medium itself. I'm thinking specifically of Ministry and the way the Chicago EL colored his sound. Your prose has a rolling quality that reminds me of the sea. It keeps coming and then receding and then coming again. Considering this, do you think living near the sea has had this effect on your prose? Is it some other influence? How would this book have been different if it'd been written in Chicago or Cleveland instead of Tokyo, Japan?

David Hoenigman: My surroundings have an impact on everything I write, but I think I let that influence come to the fore more in my first novel *Burn Your Belongings*. I wish the sea were more a part of my life, but really it's just something I pass on the way to work. So I only see it for a minute or two each day. I think I need to talk about how I wrote this book to really answer your question. Years ago, I was experimenting using videos as source material

for my writing. I had a bunch of footage from my first few years in Tokyo that a friend and I had shot on an old Hi8 camera. I would do an activity where I watch ten seconds of film, pause it, and then try to write at least three lines about that ten second segment. The writing didn't necessarily attempt to reconstruct the situation that was happening on the screen. Sometimes it did, just to ground things or move things along, but I gave emotional tangents and fragments of other memories equal importance. Sometimes I'd have to watch the segments over and over again until I could extract something meaningful. So I just did this with a bunch of Hi8 tapes, and discovered I was really happy with the outcome. Like the actual scene would just be two or three minutes of friends and I having a conversation in a restaurant, but the resulting text would be a really cool, sort of Cubist depiction of that. Also, an important aspect of the method I forgot to mention is that I watched the videos without sound. It's a visual experience. Your writing's dictated by what you see.

Anyway, this activity is at the core of *Squeal for Joy*. Using the Hi8 tapes, I got a lot of interesting short pieces. But when I thought about writing a novel in this fashion I felt I wanted to amplify it and set it on fire. So it occurred to me that instead of using home videos as the source material I should use actual studio produced movies. I thought it'd be more interesting if I used two cinematic sources and merged the results into one text. I chose an old Italian film and a super gory *yakuza* movie, and subjected them to the Hi8 routine: ten second segments, no sound, the segments watched repeatedly if necessary until they produced at least three lines of text. So I had text A (based on the Italian film) and text B (based on the *yakuza* movie), and I just simply laid them out in alternating chunks as if they were one long text on the pages of the novel. One chunk is about a third of a page, so any given page from the novel is either A-B-A form or B-A-B form. For whatever reason I also threw in a chunk or two from a found footage horror film and a fetish compilation clip.

So, I guess to answer your question about the rhythm of the prose: I'm the one doing the writing and my surroundings have an impact on me, but that coming and receding vibe that you pick up on may be the different film sources moving in and out. But you're right, if I wrote *Squeal* in Cleveland or Chicago it'd be totally different. I can't say how exactly. I'd love to spend a year or so writing in the neighborhood I grew up in outside of Cleveland, and see how that would come out. I suspect the writing would be much calmer.

CL: The switching of identity, character, and point of view reminds me of how all the primary colors can be found in one combination or another- in all the colors we see in the world. It brings to mind ideas of the interconnectivity of mankind and the notion that all of our life experiences are similar; or rather, all of our emotions are similar, just put together in different combinations. Is this part of your goal with this book? Are you commenting on free will? If so, does our idea of individuality lessen? Is it a phantom? Does this impinge somehow on our free will?

DH: Yes. I think what you call *interconnectivity* I've always thought of as *universality*. I like to strip identity away until it's just beings reacting

to each other. I suppose that was a goal, but I'm not sure if this book reaches its goals. I kinda haven't made peace with this book yet. It feels like a living thing to me. Sometimes I pick it up and read a page and am overcome with self-consciousness, so I put it back down. Other times I pick it up and lock into the rhythm of it.

I don't know if I'm commenting on *freewill*. I think the characters in the book kind of exert their individuality in bursts, but then just continue along their pre-ordained paths. Most people can't exert their individuality whenever they want, they simply don't have enough power. I say *pre-ordained* because the images I was observing were characters in a movie. They couldn't opt out of how things were progressing. Everyone was doomed to complete their creator's vision. I believe in fate. I feel its influence strongly sometimes.

CL: The devil roams around this book, Dave. Not necessarily the western, horned and hooped devil, but "the evil that men do" is a character: and a shifting one at that. I'm wondering if he (it) is in more pain than those being tormented. Is this pain why he (it) torments others at all? Is it driven by his own pain? I'm paraphrasing, but, "He wouldn't mind to be killed. He'd just as soon be dead; just as soon we'd all be dead." Can you explain what this darker side of humanity means to you and why it figures so prominently in your book?

DH: I can think of two characters in the book who are essentially evil-generating machines. I think one of them felt that he should also suffer, but the other would have preferred to get away with it. I guess evildoers fall somewhere on that spectrum. Some just hurt others in the process of their own self-destruction. Like that guy in Miami who was so high on bath salts that he tried to eat a homeless person's face off. Others just delight in how much they can get away with and never have to answer for it, like Dick Cheney.

CL: There are positive connotations concerning humanity in *Squeal*. Not in judgment to this or that character, or in a sense of being "good" or "bad," but rather an overall sense of positivity towards the human experience in general. Do you feel that all human endeavors, if honest, are "good?"

DH: No. I think it's possible to be *honestly* bad or evil. But I don't have the answers to anything. I am envious of how a painting or a piece of music, to some degree, speaks for itself just by its presence. I feel like I'm not allowed to present a book that way. The process I mentioned earlier, the extracting of text from ten second film clips -that's it, that's the book. If you analyze *Squeal*, you may get some insight into how I feel about things, but I don't claim to be right about anything. I am trying to poke at my soul with a stick. It's not that I feel I have such a fascinating view of things. I just think that if you imposed this situation (the process I used to write this book) on anyone, the results would be interesting. I just willfully agitated my soul and recorded the results. So to answer your question, in so far as it concerns artists: Yes, if one's soul is sufficiently agitated the result will be "good."

I guess concept matters as much to me as the final output. Like my son and I were watching footage of Anish Kapoor's *Shooting into the Corner*. By the time

the guy revs up the absurd canon device he uses to fire paint at the wall, he's already won me over. The look of the machine, the time it takes to be ready to fire, the sound it makes; Kapoor's already won before the paint hits the canvas. And I read about this musician named Sam Kulik who watched an entire Mets game with the sound off, and recorded his own voice doing the play-by-play for the entire game, and then set his own experimental jazz soundtrack to the whole thing. I haven't heard the album yet but I already love it. It's just impossible for me to imagine that not being interesting to listen to.

But I need to make clear that in addition to the thought I put into the process I used to write *Squeal*, I also agonized over each word on the paper. I don't agonize over whether or not I'll convey a certain message to people, more just over rhythm. I don't mean to downplay the craftsmanship of what Kapoor and Kulik do, nor devalue their end result. I just felt an instant connection with their process.

CL: *Squeal* reminded me of *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius. As if every section in your book has a lesson about the nature of humanity, unfettered by dialogue, where the basest of instincts flush about and collide with what modern society is telling us about behavior. Can you see *Squeal* being thought of as a guide to real life?

DH: No. I don't think anyone could use *Squeal* as a guide to life. Maybe it could give someone insight into other ways of expressing themselves, but it's probably best to leave it at that. I don't feel the responsibility to offer that kind of guidance. At the moment, I'm sitting here listening to an Archie Shepp album. Beauty is its own justification. I'm not declaring my own work beautiful, I'm just trying to tell you where I'm coming from.

CL: What was your intent with the use of color and character?

DH: I am interested in how color affects things. *Burn Your Belongings* was mostly black and white. I wanted *Squeal* to be more neon Tokyo. But also, in a pragmatic sense, I used it as a device to differentiate characters. At one point, I was writing about four guys in a car. Since there are no names allowed in this style of writing, I had to identify each entity in a concise functional way. Using color enabled me to do this. I see the text as a towering structure of twisted wire coat hangers. I tie colorful little ribbons to it here and there, sometimes to better identify things, sometimes just to be an asshole.

CL: The bits about the violence and weight of the war are honest and have a healing power to them. Having been there I feel like you have captured the emotional symptoms and reverberations accurately. What is your insight into this phenomenon? Care to speak on this?

DH: It turned out both cinematic sources I used were very violent. I knew that one would be (I had seen it already, and it was a *yakuza* movie after all), but I thought the other film would contrast that violence. It didn't work out that way. The old Italian film had a more everyday violence, at times more disturbing than the over the top Japanese stuff. Thinking of

violence (or the threat of violence) as a constant in one's life led me to think of you Chris, and what it had to be like for you in Afghanistan. I was never able to reconcile my image of the guy I'd spent so many happy youthful hours drinking beers and discussing music and books with to the guy that was now walking around in a desert (or whatever) wearing a helmet and carrying a gun. That's my concept of *war* –the fact that you were there, that these forces felt justified in risking your life.

CL: Finally, I'm just curious if you've read John Gardner's *Grendel*. In it he uses Beowulf's monster as a narrator and a foil for philosophy and life's intricacies. I felt there was a similarity to it-tonally I guess- that you may enjoy.

DH: I know of *Grendel*, of the concept, but I haven't read it. I play with different viewpoints all throughout *Squeal for Joy*. Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* is an important book to me. Genet pushed me in a certain direction.



David F. Hoenigman's debut novel, [Burn Your Belongings](#) (Jaded Ibis Press, 2010), swiftly moved to cult status and is now taught in college literature and creative writing courses. [Squeal for Joy](#) (Schism[2] Books, 2016) is his second novel. Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, David has lived in Japan since 1998 and is the founder and organizer of *Paint Your Teeth*, an avant-garde live performance event regularly held in Tokyo. He is an assistant professor at Meikai University and contributing writer for *The Japan Times*.

Photo Credit: Hiro Ugaya



Christopher Lyke grew up in Ohio. He served in the U.S. Army from 2003-2010 as an enlisted infantryman and has a Master's degree in education from DePaul University. He now teaches English for the Chicago Public Schools. Chris also runs [Line of Advance](#), a non-profit website for veteran art and writing. On Saturdays in the fall he can be found watching the Buckeyes at Vaughn's Pub. Chris has been published in *Blaze Vox*, *Proud To Be Vol. 4*, *Military Experience and the Arts*, and *Heart of a Veteran*.