

# “The exception to what is human about being human”: A Conversation With Jason Snyder

written by Joe Milazzo | January 28, 2016



Before we banish the term “unflinching” from our critical vocabulary forever, we might permit it one last flourish, and in the direction of Jason Snyder’s *Family Album*. For here is a novel that is truly fearless in its confronting the most monstrous aspects of how we socialize each other. Never sensationalist or gratuitous, and unflinching in allowing its insights to remain upright rather than skulk forth like secrets that must be exposed, *Family Album* is a book that—in this reader’s experience anyway—benefits from a slow approach to understanding. But this is not a book that requires caution. Or, really, any of those Romantic-by-way-of-Victorian-mores attitudes many of us have been trained to apply to any experience of a novel concerned at all with matters domestic. I suppose what I mean to say is: don’t play a game of chicken with this novel that it’s not, after all, playing with you. Rather, let yourself descend upon it, and like a bomb, certain only of its own annihilatory consummation, falling (and falling, and falling) from a height beyond imagining.

– JM

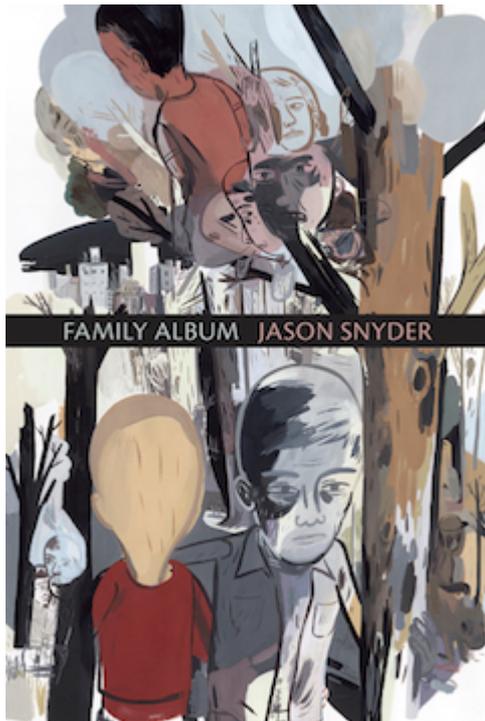
What other writers have to say about *Family Album*:

“Wherever love means to lie and words aren’t for speaking and pain is how you’re known, family is taking form, and its emergence is Jason Snyder’s work. *Family Album* is not about a boy’s refusal of his parents’ banal rage. It’s about meaning’s freedom from nothing’s grip.” –R.M. Berry

“An exacting, exquisite and merciless book brimming with expectant dread.”  
–Brian Evenson

“... a baroque opera, exquisite and horrifying, with arias and recitatives, refinements and bloodbaths.” –Robert Glück

“A fresh distortion, and a brave debut.” –Noy Holland



1) Maybe this is only apocryphal, but I seem to recall Stephen King once confessing to an interviewer that the only scene in one of his own books that truly scared him was the scene in *The Shining* when Jack Torrance finally enters Room 217. In fact, I seem to recall King indicating that he dreaded writing that particular scene. Did you experience anything similar with respect to any of the specific horrors contained within *Family Album*?

This book was very painful for me to write. It began with what I assumed was a straightforward premise: To write toward one of the more, if not most, emotionally complex and profound moments I can remember experiencing as a child. That it took me the better part of, I think, thirteen years to get to that moment in writing probably provides a credible answer to your question. But the moment can only be considered one of the book's "horrors," in the way I suspect you mean, when considered in total. Just the simple act of making space, if only in the mind, for another human being. The dread of writing that moment, however, may have been more about a fear of finishing the book, a fear of altering my relationship to the way it haunts me.

In writing each chapter, I followed a similar order: first the faux-photographic tracks as a backbone, then the dialogue in the interstices, and finally, after considerable strain and unwillingness, I would step into the, let's call them, proto-linguistic constructions of Matthew's sense-making processes, for want of a better description. At first, I dreaded writing these sections for the simple fact of foundering. Just too much failure in the failure, and not enough of what I wanted from them. But as they trained me how to write them and helped me better understand what they could be or are, I began to dread writing them for another reason: that the pain of holding as much of what Matthew was going through in my mind at once simply to leave a trail of navigating it in language became wholly depleting. That what had been merely performance anxiety had become the wound of performance

itself.

And for a time, there was something somewhat delicious about writing the dark dialogue, in particular the father's, with his high diction and malevolent spite. But several years into writing the book I began to notice a pattern. Whenever I felt myself prone to unreasonable interpretations of the words or actions of someone in my life, it was a sure bet that I was working through this dialogue in my writing life. Not that I felt myself in the grip of its content, but that the apparatus of its creation, the inner certitude to bend a kernel of truth toward a selfish skewering end, had found its place inside me somewhere, infecting and wanting to make its presence known. These too became difficult scenes to face.

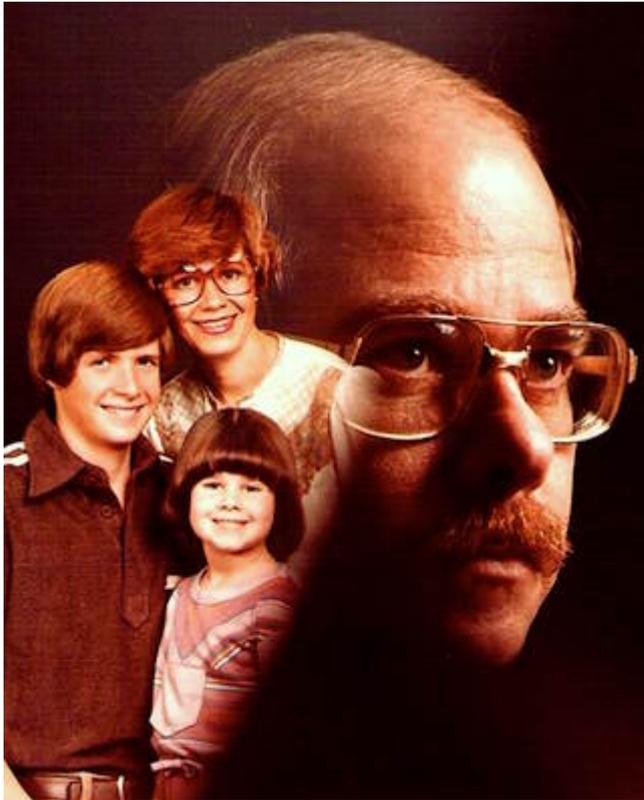
But there are specific lines that may be my own personal Room 217s. Interestingly, many occur in the bathroom, as King's scene ultimately does, or as a result of something that transpires in the bathroom. Though not all of these would, on the surface, be readily recognized as horrors when reading them.

## **2) What is the author's responsibility toward the victims that populate his / her narratives?**

Fidelity in allowing their tales to be told in a way that rises above emotional pornography.

## **3) Assuming the distinction is not too fine: are families cosmologies, or are families mythologies?**

I can't speak for families in general, but I would say that for the family depicted in this book it is likely a mythology in service of a pathological cosmology. And while each member of the family upholds this mythology, as ordained by the cosmology, the mythology—and its oracle—has but one speaker, and that speaker, by placing itself at the center of the cosmology and thus controlling the mythology, is the primary subject, interpreter, and mover of all. The only alternative may be to create your own system outside this mythology, whether in an imaginary realm hidden away in your mind or far away in some other orbit of life achieved via banishment, self-banishment or otherwise. Because within the system circumscribed by this particular cosmology, you are not allowed to have your own story, let alone tell it, let alone see your words stand in equivalence with mythos.



#### 4) What are the wages of omniscience?

While it may be a case of the-call-is-coming-from-inside-the-house, I'm not entirely convinced how much at least the writing of *Family Album* addresses or employs omniscience, which to me, under almost any sustained scrutiny, seems to be a remarkably unstable theoretical term in practice. Surely hallmarks of "limited omniscience" are to be found in reading *Family Album*—the sense of an implied narrative authority passing judgments in the quasi-photographic sections, the semblance of access to Matthew's interior sense-making facilities in those sections that appear to employ them in the writing—but the writing of *Family Album* relied more on what I might call telepathy, divining, and performance than on knowing in the traditional sense of omniscience. Yes, there was an outlined trajectory, and yes, a concerted effort was undertaken to understand as fully as possible the dynamics of the family depicted in the book as a system, and its impact on Matthew in particular. But for the most part, at least at the level of the processes involved in writing the book, the narrative is more aimed at embodying a known system in navigation of a given context and leaving a constrained literary record of the system moving through that context—how it internalizes conflict and pain, how it interprets gestures and expressions, how it attempts to derive meaning from evolving and imposed pathologies. Because of this, I have always misunderstood *Family Album* to be a phenomenological book, rather than an epistemological one.

Of course, feedback between the various overlapping processes of writing – outlining, contemplating, note taking, getting actual words on the page, editing, misreading, writing about the writing, and so on – ultimately moves the narrative toward a more coherent and consistent "narrative voice," with its implicit perspectives, favored focalizations, tonalities, and the like, and it is here that I find the use of economics as a metaphor in your

question, i.e., “wages,” most intriguing. Through each of these processes, and through the various roles I as a writer play as part of them, something is always, continually being exchanged, and at a cost. A memory from me as a person with imaginative faculties, personal experiences, and blind spots being employed in the inexplicable process of drawing words from an imaginative field by me as a writer with desires to make and deform meaning from language and experience, later sculpted, cut down, and redirected by me as an editor with aesthetic inclinations and thoughts of reception, and on and on and on. Certainly something similar occurs in reading the resulting narrative voice once the book is complete, and I am sure that this experience can lend meaningful insights into the trade-offs and wages, as you say, that this narrative voice makes or earns, but it would be difficult for me to comment on how that economy might work in this context.

**5) Matthew’s consciousness is primary to the reader’s experience of this novel. However, although possessed of flex and torque, Matthew’s consciousness is less a continuous expression (a “stream”) of self than “it” is a field or site in which various discourses assault each other and vie for supremacy. How deterministic is language in this novel?**

I think the distinction you make between stream versus site or field is apt for this book, so thank you for that. As I alluded to earlier, writing these sections ultimately came to represent, to my mind, an act of embodying and navigating the various “states” Matthew may have been in – emotionally, physically, psychologically – during the events leading into and out of those sections in the book. I came to think of the writing itself as a kind of trail left in language from moving through this abstracted terrain. In this way, I would say the language is less deterministic than performative, in that writing through these sections would not produce the same output from a given starting point, as my attention and insight into these states would alter on any given day of writing, and be affected by previous experiences with the text in the way that any improvisational art is with its evolving material. In this way, the writing could, at least theoretically at the level of the language that forms the beats, or “sentences,” of these sections, go almost anywhere, but in practice, and at the level of the section and text overall, that “almost anywhere” becomes severely limited due to the rhetorical battle of discourses, and the results of that ongoing battle within and, perhaps more accurately, on Matthew, that you’ve recognized.

Some of the language of these sections is deterministic simply because it operates as quotation, in the musical sense of the term. The hope is that, by referring to text in other sections, reading can be oriented toward those quoted sections, providing the semblance of a foothold in the terrain being navigated, and hopefully pulling in ghosted impressions from the experiences these sections evoke. But the full force of what is deterministic about the language in these sections is a function of the dynamics of the family, and how these dynamics impact Matthew’s ability to make sense of his world.

At the core of the malignant dysfunction of a family like this is a continual litany of invalidation and gaslighting, a kind of pathological litigation over who rightfully owns Matthew’s identity, or more specifically, the processes by which he might eventually form an identity from his experience.

It is a certain kind of training meant to leave an indelible mark deep within him, and language, as opposed to physical violence, is the primary tool used to orient his facilities for understanding and functioning toward a particular outcome that the training seeks to replicate – effectively, its own image, or at least an image that reflects the training’s (or trainer’s) power to impose an image on another, to bend verisimilitude to will. This language provides a kind of overwhelming background operation that must always be competed with, especially for someone on the cusp of adolescent self-consciousness, like Matthew in this book. I believe it was William S. Burroughs who equated language with a virus. This kind of language I might view more as a prion.

**6) *Family Album* is far from lacking in complexity, but it is not a novel that has much use for subtlety in the conventional sense. For example, much of the drama in the book derives from the fact that Matthew is incredibly gifted with respect to apprehending his world’s symbolic order. (“Means” is a word that carries tremendous weight in this book.) Matthew’s parents, while they may be dishonest with each other, are nothing if not plain in their contempt. And the most subtle character in the book (Matthew’s teacher) is perhaps the most insidious. Do you agree with *Slate* senior editor Forrest Wickman when he writes [“it’s when subtlety is held up as an unquestioned virtue that it does the most damage”](#)?**

That’s an interesting read. Thanks for sharing Wickman’s article. I would definitely agree with his assertion that there is damage in upholding subtlety as an unquestioned virtue. But while he focuses predominantly on accessibility and reception, I might move the discussion more in the direction of how an unthinking devotion to subtlety as an aesthetic virtue affects urgency and intent. Artworks derived from an activist urge, those that intentionally seek to arrest us into re-evaluating our values, are often taken down a value peg with this kind of critique, and in a way that ultimately devalues their themes and messages. After all, this kind of critique stems from the same flow of power through our social and political culture that facilitates micro-aggressions, tone-policing, and the like. In this way, this kind of blind aesthetic policing can act as a means for enforcing a certain process of subjugation, and train us to miss the bigger picture by aiming our critical facilities toward the little things as oracular sites of possible meaning. In concert with other factors, like who is calling for this devotion and to what ends, we can be made to lose perspective and become susceptible to influences against our better judgment, or worse.

In shaping his argument, Wickman discusses what he calls one of “subtlety’s more defensible defenses,” saying: “According to this line of thought, to be unsubtle is bad because you deny the joy of realization.” What I find interesting here is that realization, joyful or otherwise, requires pattern recognition—in other words, the ability and facility to constellate a number of small, subtle moments and gestures across wide stretches of experience and to process this information in a way that illuminates connections between these moments, and ultimately exposes the machinations beneath. Abusive relationships, whether in the family or in society at large, prey on this

requirement, subverting it. They can become extremely complex and enmeshed, implicating you in the pattern. They can gaslight when they sense you may be wising up, causing you to call into question your own facilities or reasoning. They can keep you in a relentless state of attention to subtle gestures trying to figure out, in isolation, what each of these gestures could possibly mean. In this way, denying realization itself becomes a full-time process of abuse. And some of us are simply too young to connect the dots, feel too trapped to make use of any realization, are too exhausted in fighting against this relentless state, have been denied the facility for making realizations of this magnitude or asserting ourselves when we do, or are simply too demoralized by the fact that there is no joy but only harder work, often extremely hard work, in discovery. Here is where a hammer to smash the mirror is of real use. And sometimes that means blunt artworks, or narratives that withhold redemption as a means of dissipating the tensions they illuminate.

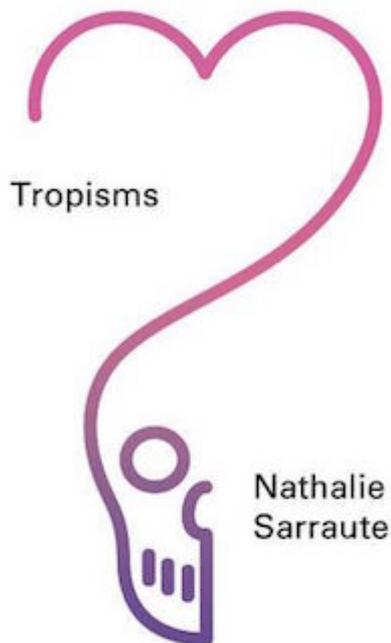
**7) *Family Album* is certainly not nostalgic for the 1980s, and the 80s, as a set of cultural referents, plays hardly any role in the book. Yet the 1980s feel essential to the *Family Album* nevertheless. What is accomplished by setting this book in the past rather than the present? The future?**

There are mundane logistical reasons for not setting *Family Album* closer to the present day as pertains to parenting, identity formation, and family dynamics that I did not feel equipped to address when developing this book. Navigating dysfunction in the era of cellphone communications. The Internet as an outlet for the abused to explore and create new identities for themselves, and also as a haven for predatory behaviors. The fact that a child undergoing the difficulties Matthew does in this book would likely be medicated if he was 12 years old just a few years after the book takes place, even with parents as fearful of stigmatization as he has in *Family Album*. That the extent of free-range exploration of neighborhoods and neighboring woodlands undertaken by children in this book itself might be construed in a suburban setting as that much more of a form of parental neglect if set in the present day. But at the basest level, the reasoning behind setting *Family Album* in the past, and in the 1980s specifically, finds seed in that old chestnut, write what you know.

For me, looking back, or more importantly for this book, feeling back to those times, cultural referents were hardly to be found. And when they were, they became conduits to an impression or atmosphere that proved more essential to the act of writing the book. The objects, the events—they simply did not hold my attention enough to sustain the kind of intensity necessary to write about them like this. Instead background tensions of that time period percolated. Becoming aware of the greater world at the apex of the Cold War. Being subjected to social frameworks of white suburbia in the 1980s without yet being fully conscious of their machinations. The rising awareness of parental impact on children's outcomes, and the increasing fallout of "parenting" as an intentional activity. The cross-currents of the socio-political climate of the 1980s, a decidedly Machiavellian era—Reaganomics, the Moral Majority, Iran-Contra, deregulation, the Culture Wars, labor union busting, and on and on—brought into and playing out indirectly, and in

secret, in the home.

Perhaps it is here that the 1980s feel most essential to the book, I don't know. Maybe there is something essential to this family, its pathologies and the ways in which these pathologies take hold of its dynamics and members, that speaks of the 1980s. I can't help but think back on the 1980s as a time when a particular brand of creditor-debtor relationship took hold. One that I was not even aware of at the time, and in which the full subjectivity of the debtor was owned. Perhaps something in the father's life outside what is depicted in the book cemented this sense of propriety, enforcing his belief that whatever Matthew might make of himself against this dysfunctional backdrop was something he, as a father, was owed.



**8) If there were a seminar to be taught on the "The Literature of the Face," besides *Family Album*, Abe's *The Face of Another*, Sarraute's *Tropisms* and Gogol's "The Nose", what other readings should I assign?**

For me, coming across Sarraute's *Tropisms* lent license to further pursue early ideas I had been working through regarding the body and action as sites for interpretative language in writing. Free writing before visual artworks probably initiated this itch, but encountering the work of Sarraute and others, such as Marcel Cohen's *Mirrors*, helped precipitate a certain click in my own writing, namely, that description, the means by which an image is chronicled or established, and interpretation of that image can co-exist within narrative to what at least to me as a writer is an interesting effect. And so the family album photographic conceit of the book began falling into place as a kind of narrative residue of coinciding the performance of evoking

or creating an image with the performance of interpreting it, of analyzing expressions as they are “made.”

It wasn't for quite a while working on this book that another motivation for this inclination revealed itself to me: that in families afflicted by malignant narcissism the face as a site of performance and interpretation takes on the highest of stakes, as your every expression becomes an opportunity to judge how well you reflect the pathological desires, worldview, and self-image of the person looking at you. The slightest look, the slightest gesture that troubles or calls into question the desired reflected expression can set off a rage, or mock rage, that can have damaging ramifications for days. Even the expression of the malignant narcissist becomes a kind of barometer of your coming hours, and can be used with great subtlety to keep you in check. The face as an instrument of power, as a mirror, as a mask.

While writing this book, in my other literary life as part of Sidebrow Books, I had the honor of publishing Miranda Mellis's collection of fictions and fables *None of This Is Real*. In the opening short short, “The Face,” the narrator finds their face in sudden revolt, incapable of assuming expected, acceptable expressions when in the company of family, friends, and acquaintances, whenever “a closeness or depth of feeling or sincerity” is required. This story could certainly find home in your course. But in moving the challenge of shaping just the right expression in the face of pathology, expectation, and power beyond the family setting, beyond the network of acquaintances and friends, and into society at large, the works of writers of color I would think would form your course's core. In addition to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, I would add Nella Larsen's *Passing* as a start—and would completely understand, of course, if *Family Album* ultimately found its way off your syllabus once your list was complete.



9) On page 80 of *Family Album*, I paused long enough to pencil this in the margin: “Masculinity is terrorism, even for men.” How would a non-male “protagonist” make this a different book?

It’s telling that your note occurs here, I think, because the very few lines that find home on this page speak to the kind of vampiric, mafioso-inspired paternalism at the heart of the family in this book—that brand of macho fathering that stresses beyond reason the idea of a son “being made” and “having a maker.” Underlying this dynamic, I think, is the belief that adolescence is a time for taking sons aside and not just educating them about the inequities and power flows of the greater world they are now just becoming aware of but to train them, through a certain kind of hazing that emphasizes fealty and secrecy, not just to recognize and potentially navigate these inequities and power flows but to perpetuate and exploit them. It is a culture—or perhaps more accurately, a loose federation of individual instantiations of a certain kind of mind-set—that does not consider you a man unless you assimilate its pathologies.

Adolescence then, for many boys raised under these conditions, becomes in part a ritual of passing into a particular order of “exceptionalism,” a kind of crossing over from being human to being the exception to what is human about being human, all while establishing a bond of ownership through debt for the bestowal of this rite, and with it the knowledge of how to achieve and exploit power to your own ends. It is a vision of masculinity born in part of the dog-eat-dog “survivalism” that ripples through our society, that you need to metaphorically kill—that is to say, negate or invalidate the humanity of—anyone who gets in the way of you getting yours. Or more

specifically, anyone who gets in the way of you getting yours on behalf of your maker, he who made you, his "legacy."

So while I can't speak for the experience of non-males in this kind of familial setting, in answer to your question regarding gender itself as a site for metastasizing what is terrorizing about "masculinity," I would venture to guess that this brand of abusive parenting victimizes across gender lines, but for a (cisgendered) son the abuse also encodes an additional, intended instructional "value" and expectation, not just that he must assume a submissive, dominated, and victimized role within the family, but that he must assimilate these processes of subjugation, guard them as a secret—almost somatic—tradition of power, and perpetuate their use against others, both within the family and in society at large.

No doubt a different book would come of stripping away this "maker" facet of the father-son relationship depicted in the book, or in subjecting a non-male protagonist to this kind of encoded hazing bent on training them to become the father. How different only the writing of that book could possibly say.

**10) One of the last images we have of Matthew is this: "Matthew out the window at the the hospital entrance, expression that of one at a remove from himself, dwelling in proximity to an emotion nothing could cause to appear, alone in the back of the cab." One has the feeling, by this point in the novel, that if only causality would break down completely, or if only Matthew could accept that phenomena may be meaningfully connected by some force other than causality, he might be saved. For it has also become evident that Matthew's insights into the how and why of his world, burnished to a sort of brilliance by trauma as they may be, are still essentially childlike, partial, mistaken. Is Matthew's salvation—the salvation of any individual in Matthew's position, for that matter possible—within narrative, or only in liberating oneself from narrative?**

This is a great and particularly challenging question. On the one hand, the fact that Matthew is 12 years old is essential to the exploratory interests of the book. He has entered a stage of maturation in which a larger awareness of his world is opening up, and the natural onset of self-consciousness of that age with regard to making sense of one's place in that world has been amplified by the scrutiny placed on his family as part of the adoption process. In what ways are my behaviors and sense of self a reflection of the environment in which I am being raised? How might an acceptable portrayal of a son in a family deemed worthy of adopting a second child in the eyes of the state actually look? How much are my feelings a product of an unknown reservoir within me processing such questions? But, being 12, Matthew has not yet developed the facilities to do anything we might label "meaningful" about these nascent glimmers of self and his world to come. He is, and this is in part a consequence of the specific dysfunctional context of his family, trapped in a state of evaluation without the facility to act. So while he may, as you alluded to earlier, have a gift for apprehending his world's symbolic order, that pattern recognition I mentioned earlier is latent, perhaps emerging, but certainly under siege. *Family Album* does offer some of the trappings of a coming-of-age novel, but it is necessarily antecedent. It is a novel of system, state, and processing more than it can be one of viable

redemption. It may be the precursor to a redemptive narrative, one external to this book or perhaps ghosted through it in a certain way, at a remove. In that way, "salvation" may well still be possible, through narrative.

On the other hand, in working on this book, and in considering the dysfunctional dynamics of the family depicted in it more deeply, further complexities in this urge against epiphany began to take hold. Traditionally structured narratives, in particular those with notions of family at their centers, often act to enforce abusive patterns in dysfunctional family structures. And not just because the movie ends with everyone throwing up their hands at one another's flaws and finding themselves in an awkward though thawing embrace because forgiveness and living with differences is what families are for. Not just because the novelist is lauded for uncovering the hidden humanity in the repugnant sibling or mother to move us toward this moment. But because these narrative arcs, and our hope to find them resonating within our own lives, are the very storylines that abusers use, complete with all that artful subtlety, to keep stringing everyone along. Reconciliation, or at least its momentary semblance, can be of great service in tightening the chains further. At a certain point, the verisimilitude of these narratives is reversed. Instead we actively seek their equivalence, labor to create them, in our own lives, often against great odds. In this way, perhaps there is something inherent in narrative, in the fact that it is inscribed or overly fated and laden, is a means by which we, or others, establish a sense of our identity, is often controlled by those in positions of power, that damns some individuals in certain contexts. Perhaps Matthew is one.



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lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and twins.