

The Weird Interview: Jeremy Robert Johnson

written by Gabino Iglesias | March 9, 2015



Jeremy Robert Johnson is in that very short list of authors I get angry about when folks tell me they haven't read their work. Fast, unique, incredibly smart, dark, gory, philosophical, and wildly entertaining just begins to describe Johnson's work, and anyone who has read him has to either agree or get stabbed with a rusty shank. In any case, Johnson's long awaited novel is out now. *Skullcrack City* is all of the things already mentioned and much, much more. I won't go into gory details about the novel because you need to check it out. What I will do, however, is give you a weird peak at the mind of a man Chuck Palahniuk called dazzling.

GI: I read somewhere that Angel Dust Apocalypse is a cult hit. What's that and how do I get one?

JRJ: No idea what that is, aside from something my publisher likes to say. Maybe it means a couple of people liked that book a lot, sat around in robes believing it was prophecy, and had some tantric sex while listening to latter-day Sting. Like they used a copy of my book to stabilize the boombox playing "Fields of Gold" while they gave each other oil rubdowns in the compound rec center.

Speaking of stings, is this a set-up? You know I can't answer that kind of question sincerely.

Full disclosure: My kid gives me every illness known to man, and there are oceans of snot going hurricane in my skull right now. I took some DayQuil, but I'm pretty sure that's just NyQuil they colored orange to make you feel like it's okay to take it during the day. But it isn't, not really. I'm weirded out, man.

GI: The FBI knocked on your door recently. What was that all about?

JRJ: I wish I knew. I have my suspicions, but they're founded only in uncertainty.

I know this—I was writing a very paranoid sequence in *Skullcrack City*, a total Henry-Hill-in-the-last-third-of-Goodfellas kind of thing, and as part of the process I was researching all the new NSA revelations and in particular government/corporate collusion in pharmaceutical testing, and I went way down the rabbit hole on that, probably to some sites that would pop on a watch list.

On top of that, my wife comes home from a security conference on the east

coast and tells me about some Silverlight plug-in program that could be letting people covertly observe and listen to me using my laptop. So I do my best to deactivate that and then put a post-it note over the webcam lens.

The very next day—Knock Knock. Young woman at my door. Sharp black suit. Big black SUV with government plates. Puts a keen eye on me. Scopes the interior of my house. Starts asking me questions about a “person of interest” that’s supposed to be my neighbor (but, surprise, no one in my neighborhood’s ever heard of them). I tell her as much. She squints at me, makes some call in her head, thanks me, heads-out.

The timing was too strange. Part of me was thinking, “You’re nuts, man. Don’t pretend your little counter-culture stories warrant that kind of investigation. That’s ego bullshit.” And part of me was totally freaked out.

GI: You’re in a boat lost at sea with four writers; who are they and who gets eaten first?

JRJ: Cameron Pierce, Cody Goodfellow, Henri Charriere, and Norman Mailer.

Cameron catches all the fish, so we don’t have to eat each other.

Cody makes crazy feel normal and keeps us entertained as we drift.

Henri “Papillon” Charriere has great luck escaping peril and finding land, so he’s good mojo for sure.

And Mailer’s there because I want to hit him with a hammer, and you know the old saying: It ain’t a hammer fight until Mailer shows up.



GI: Skullcrack City is out, but it followed a long, twisted path to publication. Did you ever think about just dropping the whole thing and opening up a cool vegan sandwich shop and just wearing jorts all day while talking DFW with customers?

JRJ: No. I can’t risk that kind of business venture now that I have a kid. And I have bad jort-knees. And I’m not vegan. And DFW discussions wear thin because they’re either effusive shared praise or hipster irreverence and suicide jokes, for the most part.

Skullcrack definitely hit some road bumps, but I started my career with five years of consecutive rejection before I sold my first short story, so it’s clear I’ve got persistence beyond reason. I don’t know how to give up. It’s awful. It binds me to this sub-poverty emotional roller-coaster career path for life!

GI: More Skullcrack City stuff: did you purposefully mash three novels together or did it just happen? Why do you insist on writing stuff that’s so hard to review? How many hours of research went into writing that thing?

JRJ: *Skullcrack* is pretty dense, by my standards, but it was my first time

“noveling” and damn it, I made *The Most First Novel* First Novel in the History of First Novels. Which is to say I lost my mind and tried everything I’d been thinking of for a decade. Thing sat in my head for so long that it ate prior versions of itself and ended up with teeth in its brain. I’m explaining nothing, because that tends to make a book inert, but if anybody really wanted to nerd out over the choruses and interwoven themes and name meanings and allusions and foreshadowing, or if they wanted to take it as a fictional critique of ideas central to both noir and cosmic horror, or if somebody’s looking for a satire of Roth-ian narcissism, or—I mean, you get the idea. There are anagrams hidden in this thing. Weeks of research in there. I read an anthropology encyclopedia and the DSM 5. It’s so ridiculous. There are a handful of really abstract looking Excel spreadsheets about this book that only I can understand, and I’d be committed if a psychologist saw them.

But hopefully I’ve buried all that crazy just deep enough that people can just kick back and read the thing.

I think most reviewers have done a noble and kind-hearted job reviewing the book, but in keeping its secrets they make it sound like it’s mostly about a sad banker who jerks off and does drugs, so I think they’re having fun with it. It’s like tricking your friend into watching *Audition*—“It’s about a lonely guy who’s trying to find love in a questionable way. Just trust me. Watch it.”

GI: What’s your favorite parasite?

JRJ: You never forget your first, so I’m going to have to go with the bot fly (or its larva in particular). I was thirteen when I read Richard Selzer’s amazing essay “The Exact Location of the Soul” and the section about bot fly larva extraction gave me that perfect mix of repulsion and fascination that breeds obsession. Never looked back.

My last two favorite excursions into parasite world: Nick Cutter’s *The Troop* and *Parasite Rex* by Carl Zimmer. The first is fiction, the latter isn’t, and both are great.

GI: We missed you at the last Bronies and Lit meeting. You know how we operate, man: blood in, blood out. What’s your excuse?

JRJ: You really want me there? I just told you I might be watch-listed by the Feds. How do you know they haven’t flipped me? I could be on some COINTELPRO shit.

Also, I’m behind on my *My Little Pony* watching and I’m fighting with my kid about whether Rainbow Dash is the best pony and it’s shaken me to my core and I don’t know what I believe any more. We just sit by each other on the couch and watch *Phineas and Ferb* and pretend like the ponies don’t even exist anymore. Last time I brought up the Rainbow Dash issue the kid told me I’d “emptied all his good heart energy” and then he turned his back to me until I left the room. It’s fucking sad, honestly. Thanks for bringing it up.

GI: I asked Brian Allen Carr who the worst rapper is and he didn't answer. Same question for you. Don't chicken out.

JRJ: Baby Gramps (aka Jonathan Franzen). His Freedom Isn't Free mixtape was pay-for-play only. C'mon Franzeezy! That's bullshit. "Gramps Don't Tweet, Gramps 2 Real" was the only decent track on that whole thing, and that's just because of Lil B's guest verse.

Also, I was never feeling Soulja Boy. The underground is always vibrant, but as far as radio rap goes, Soulja Boy's brief time on air was pretty unlistenable. But I like that he beefed with Ice-T, because Ice-T is a half-man half-kangaroo who fights sex crime, so he makes everything better.

GI: *Do you really want to know the answers?*

JRJ: Not if you're going to mansplain them to me.

Although I totally welcome help when I get stuck on a crossword puzzle.

GI: A big bird told me you cut a few thousand words from Dr. T's Life out of Skullcrack City. Are you getting soft? What's next, a violence/gore/weirdness-free romance?

JRJ: All told, I chopped nine thousand words from Chapter 24. I had lost my mind. I'd gone way overboard. I'd assumed the reader's interest in medical atrocity and experimentation would be equal to mine, totally separate from the main narrative. And that it would be acceptable to spend that much time inside the mind of a war criminal. And on my first edit, reading that section, I broke out in a sweat, like "What have I done?" Part of it, since I'm a philistine, was actually done in homage to the ending of Chinatown. I've always admired noir stories that had that kind of punk rock sensibility like, "Thanks for joining us for this story. You said you liked it dark. Here you go."

But a novella's worth of atrocity was just too much. It made me feel kind of sick inside, just re-reading it. So I stripped that section down to its bones and I think it still hits like it should, without playing so grindcore.

I might do a romance someday, but the next novel is more in the realm of The Outsiders meets Lord of the Flies fed through a Cronenberging Machine.

GI: Where do you score your Hex? What's your favorite non sequitur?

JRJ: To answer both:

The only place I've ever found Hex was at a tiny bar in Paris' Montmartre district. I was there with Mailer. We were in town for the hammer fights.

And then, of course, the ghost bought all the apples.