



Illustration: Amy Breedon

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An Interview with Josh Rolnick

Josh Rolnick's debut collection, *Pulp and Paper*, won the 2011 John Simmons Short Fiction Award, selected by Yiyun Li. His short stories have also won the Arts & Letters Fiction Prize and the *Florida Review* Editor's Choice Prize. They have been published in *Harvard Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Bellingham Review*, and *Gulf Coast*, and have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and *Best New American Voices*. Josh holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and an MA in Writing from The Johns Hopkins University. He currently serves as fiction editor of the literary journal *Unstuck*, and publisher of *Sh'ma*, a journal of Jewish ideas. He lives with his wife and three sons, dividing his time between Brooklyn, New York, and Akron, Ohio.

MG: I know you're from New Jersey, and half the stories in *Pulp and Paper* take place in New Jersey, the other half New York. Now, I'm from New Jersey, and the warm types of feelings I have for the state after reading your stories are not the same types of feelings I have for New Jersey when I go back to visit. What is the type of New Jersey you were trying to present in these stories?

JR: The truth is I don't really start out when I'm writing a story with an M.O. I'm not necessarily trying to present one thing or another. That's true in terms of my characters, that's true in terms of my themes, and that's also true in terms of my settings. I don't set out to say I'm going to present a warm portrait of New Jersey. What I try to do is present a true portrait of one aspect of a place that I know. I *will* say that I'm glad to hear you say my stories present this aspect [of New Jersey] because, in the end, when I look back, New Jersey has this *Jersey Shore* image. It's obviously the butt of a lot of jokes. My aim is not to rehabilitate New Jersey. My aim is to present a portrait of a place that I know. What I like about the state is that it's pretty diverse, and New York, too. These stories are not

just suburban stories. I grew up in the suburbs. They're suburban stories, they're beach stories, they move around a lot within the state. In the New York section, there's a city story, on Coney Island, there's two Adirondack stories, and there's a western New York story. I guess what drew me was the notion that, along with the stories themselves, the places defy expectations. The borders of these states, like the border in this collection, are somewhat permeable, just like in people's lives. Avery and Gale Denny [from "Pulp and Paper"] live very separate lives. That expanse of land between them might as well be a wall. But those distinctions are somewhat arbitrary, and I'm interested in that notion of the arbitrariness, the randomness of the walls and the borders that we put up that divide us. In that way, I hope the New Jersey-New York structure also works symbolically.

I've gotten away from your question a bit. I do think that New Jersey is like any place. I don't mean to put these rose-colored glasses on when I look at it. I certainly had things I didn't like about it, too. I find that I'm drawn more to write about things in my life where there's some real spark, something about them inspires me.

MG: I guess that's part of what I'm asking. I could tell through reading the stories that New Jersey really did inspire a lot of what's in these stories because it's so vividly portrayed. So what was it about New Jersey that inspired you?

JR: I spent a lot of time at the beach when I was a kid. When you're a kid, the beach is an inspiring place to be. To me, looking out across the Great Bay, I'm still moved when I go back there by what that place stands for to me. I think we all have places like this in our childhood. I don't know that I would want to live in New Jersey, I don't know that I would want to live at the beach, but those places are in me in a different way. I think it has less to do with a conscious decision. I write about the places that I like. I write about settings that are interesting to me. The stories where the settings are the strongest, I hope, are probably the two beach stories, certainly "Mainlanders," and then the upstate New York stories. I also spent a great deal of time in upstate New York. I think setting gives an author an amazing opportunity to find characters through place. That's how I've always worked. I'll often start with the setting, and the story will kind of bloom out of that.

MG: You mean, imagining the kinds of characters that would live in a setting.

JR: Setting speaks to me first before I even know what characters are in the story. I started “Mainlanders” with kids walking to the beach. I saw the birds, I saw the sand, I could smell the air, I could see the bay, I could smell the tar on the bulkhead, but I could not, for the life of me, see the story that might emerge from that, so I started with those details. I don’t write with an outline. I don’t start with research, by and large. I start with a scene, a voice, a place, sometimes a little bit of dialog, and then I just go blindly wherever the story will take me, and that’s why I have to write a lot of drafts.

MG: I think I understand your methods fairly well, because this is how I work: Starting by blindly going forward, then having to rework, rework, scrap, recreate. Is that what your process is? Do you throw out a lot of material? Do you rewrite a lot?

JR: Yes, that is exactly what my process is. One of my favorite quotes from any writer is E.L. Doctorow: “Writing a novel is like driving across the country at night with your headlights on. You can only see as far as the front of your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” That is the way I’ve always approached writing. Michael Ondaatje talks about how, when he began *The English Patient*, all he started with was the plane crash in an African desert. He didn’t have Caravaggio, he didn’t have the nurse, he certainly didn’t have the interplay of these characters. Which is to say, you and I are not the only authors who go about it that way. You start and, through the work of the writing, you figure out what the story’s about. The very best stories, I think, surprise the writer.

I will say there are as many ways to write as there are writers. There’s no one right way. It’s only what works for you. Many people do research and do outlines. I do research, but I don’t do the research until I know what I have to look into. For “Big River” I had to know something about garnet mining, but I didn’t know that at the beginning of the story. Actually, “Big River” was a very unique story, in a sense. I was looking for a story, so I went to the Akron Public Library, and they have a book there written by a scientist who felt that he could cure the world of hunger and starvation, in Africa primarily, using insects as a food source. I was really drawn to this. Insects are one of those things I always loved as a kid. This provided me with a little spark, and so I started writing a story about this professor. What would he be like? I don’t know how well you remember that story but there’s this scene where she wants to save the world and there’s this global outreach activist. In this story, that was this professor who was going to save the world with bugs, by using bugs as a food source. So it started as a story about

this, and Finch, in the story, is completely repulsed by the whole idea. Through dozens of drafts, I realized that what was interesting to me about that story was the relationship between Garnet and Finch, and the bugs went away. They aren't even in the story now. And there's only one reference to bugs as a food source in one of the stories—in "The Herald," you know, when she's lost and can't find her way home she talks about eating pill bugs. That story was written after "Big River." You could say that probably hundreds of pages on bugs and eating bugs as a food source were whittled down to a half of a sentence in another story that was just in my head. So that's how I write, that's how I do it.

The other thing I'll say about research is that, one of my favorite books about writing is actually *On Writing*, Stephen King's book, which I love. He imagined this whole sort of haunted highway story on the Pennsylvania turnpike and he wrote the whole book, and then when he was done, at the end, he went up to the state troopers and asked if he could ride with them for a couple of days in their squad cars. He got some new ideas and he put them in, but he uses them after he had the story written. The details come later. That's much more along the lines of how I do it. Let your imagination go.

I'll give you this one other quote that I love. I think it is E.L. Doctorow quoting Henry James, actually. He says, "Imagine a situation where a woman who's lived a relatively sheltered life walks past an army barracks and overhears a sentence or two of two soldiers talking about war. That woman can go home and write a novel about war. That's the power of imagination." And I believe that's true. That's what attracts me to writing, and that's what I try to do with these stories. Imagine.

When I was a younger writer, I used to say, I'm going to write a story about X or Y. Those stories were fine. They were part of my development as a writer. I'm a very political person. I'm a Democrat. But this book has nothing to do with my politics. This book is figuring out who these characters are and being true to who they are, being true to what they believe, and trying to tell a good story that's entertaining and hopefully meaningful to people. It's about reaching people for me. Richard Ford said that writers write not to aggrandize themselves or see their names in print, not to become something big. They write to reach people, to commit an effect on people, to impact them in some way. Not change their lives, necessarily, but to reach them.

MG: To make a connection.

JR: Yeah.

(An older woman just then interrupts the interview to say hello to Rolnick. She was at a reading of his at the Akron Public Library a few weeks earlier. The woman tells Rolnick she loved his book and Rolnick thanks her before she leaves.)

What was I just saying?

MG: Why writers write.

JR: To reach people—

MG: Which is kind of evident by, you know, that was pretty funny.

JR: It's like I planned it. *(Laughs.)*

I was going to say something about politics. In “Big River,” Garnet wants an abortion, Finch wants to have the baby. I don't care who wins that fight, as a writer. I'm not trying to make a point about pro-choice or pro-life as a writer. I'm just trying to tell a story about two people caught in a horrible bind, irreconcilable. I think you can read that and say, this author must be pro-life, because you stay with Finch afterwards, you don't stay with Garnet. She goes off to Costa Rica, and you're with him at the end, thinking about that spaceman, his misery. I think you could read it and say, Wow, this author's making a strong point about pro-life, but I'm not, I'm really not. I'm personally pro-choice.

MG: That story in particular, as far as politics is concerned, I found myself getting really angry at Finch, but I never felt that the author was trying to make a point. It didn't seem overtly political to me. I didn't feel like it was that kind of story. I felt very much angry at this character for having an attitude that I completely disagree with. But I didn't feel like the story was making a comment on that politically.

JR: That's great. It's great to be mad at a character. That's a good thing. It's great to be rooting for or against a character, but it's bad to be feeling like, Oh, this author's trying to hit me over the head with a cudgel. Nobody likes that.

The same is true for setting. If you set out to say, the cudgel I'm going to be wielding today is I want people to think different about New Jersey, then you're going to write a bad book. In fact, I never thought of this, I didn't say, now I'm

going to write a collection that has four stories set in New Jersey, four in New York. I did not set out, by any stretch, to do that. I didn't know how the collection was going to hang together, or whether it would hang together. I frankly was tired of meeting with agents who said they liked my work a lot but they wanted to know how the collection held together, and it's very tough to say, well, it holds together thematically. I didn't have the title, I didn't have the structure. In fact, I had eight stories that I knew were in the collection. Four were set in New Jersey, three in New York, one in western Pennsylvania. "Pulp and Paper" was the story originally set in western Pennsylvania. But I was driving into New York City one night to meet my wife, and I was thinking about the tunnel, how there's this mosaic in the middle that says New York-New Jersey, and I said, You know, that could be the structure for this book. Except for one problem: One story was set in western Pennsylvania. By the time I got out of that tunnel, in my head I'd already moved that story to western New York.

Now, there's no way I could cavalierly move "Mainlanders" or "Innkeeping" or "Big River" or "Big Lake." What was important to me about "Pulp and Paper" was the town was a composite of Bible Belt, Farm Belt, Rust Belt, that kind of gestalt. I wasn't wedded to western Pennsylvania, itself. In fact, the geology of the Allegheny Plateau literally extends into western New York, so it was very easy for me to make that move. I had to change a few references, like the Johnstown flood became the Buffalo flood. There are things that are important to you in your stories that you're not going to change, no matter what an editor says, but there are things that are less important to you, and it's finding the balance between the two.

What was important to me in the end was getting a book published so more people could actually read the stories. Six of these stories have been published in journals, but having a book, it's changed everything. Like [talking to that older woman from earlier] could not have happened when I was publishing in lit journals only. In the past, if I told people I was a writer and they asked where they could read my stories, I would have to say, Well, you can come over and I'll open my hard drive, and that's about it. None of it was online anymore. So it's very hard to even direct people to your work. I started writing stories in 1998 and the book came out in October 2011. That's thirteen years. By any counts, that's a long time to wait. I've had a lot of great stuff happen along the way with publishing stories, etc. But in my office at home I have a rock with the Chinese character that spells "patience" and that's the one thing that's been consistent

about my process since the beginning—you have to patience, with yourself and with your work. I keep the rock there to remind myself that nothing's going to happen quickly. When it does, you can't trust it anyway.

MG: You're also working on a novel now, right? What's the process of starting this new book? When did you start it, and what's the process been like for you?

JR: Very scary, for one thing. I poured my heart and soul into this short story collection. I honed these stories, as I told you, for over thirteen years, but even more intentionally over eight or nine years. I put every piece of good writing I had into this book. I have a lot of other writing out there, but this is the best of what I have. So I really feel like I'm starting from square one with the novel. You know, I started my novel and then went on my book tour. It would be way too early for me to tell you what the novel's about because of that process that you and I talked about earlier. When you finish something you like, then have to turn to what's next, it's very daunting. I've been told my stories are novelistic, in the sense that they're longer, and they tend to unwind. Right now, I'm finishing up the publicity for this book. I'm touring through the end of December, and then I think I have to kind of just be open to the universe and see where it takes me and see what happens next. I hope to do a lot of different kinds of writing. I've been doing a lot of other kinds of writing. I'm doing a lot of writing about writing right now, so I'm still writing. But I haven't really been focused on the novel. Once this tour ends, I'll get back to it. So ask me this question in six months and I'll have a better answer.

MG: I guess one thing I can ask about the novel is, why choose to write a novel? Was there something that struck you that begged to have a novel written about it? Or was it, I did the stories and now I want to try my hand at a novel?

JR: It's a couple of things. It's a new challenge. It's unsafe terrain for me, and I think that as a writer when I'm on unsafe terrain I'm more likely to do something that's a little edgier, a little more dangerous, maybe a little more powerful. So there's that as a writer. You have to lean into what's difficult. And what's unfamiliar. I'm uncomfortable working on a novel, and being uncomfortable as a writer is a good place to be.

That's not to say, by the way—I mean, I think I'll always write stories. I love the form. I love the form for a lot of reasons, not least of which is that, I think

when you're commanding someone's attention in five, ten, fifteen pages, you have the potential to say, this is meaningful, pay attention, it's going to be over in a flash. So there's a real potential there to be moved. Not always, but sometimes that really does happen. Still, it's good to put yourself on unfamiliar ground.

The other thing I was going to say about a novel is, look, the publishing world craves novels much more than stories, and as I said, the point's about readers. It's not about becoming a bestseller. It's not about self-aggrandizing. I'd love to have thousands of readers. I love having hundreds of readers right now. It's amazing when people can come up to you in a coffee shop and say they loved your book. So, the potential audience for a novel is bigger, and you can reach more people.

Now having said that, if it doesn't work for me, I'll know. I'll have to immerse myself in it, and I'm not going to do it if it doesn't feel true. If the form doesn't feel like it's going to work, I'll work on something else. For now, it makes sense that that's the next step.