

THIS WEEK IN FICTION

BRYAN WASHINGTON ON QUEER FRIENDSHIP AND INTIMACY

The author discusses his new novella, "Server."

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In "Server," your novella, an American teaching English in Japan is drawn into an old video game, where he finds his former best friend, Vic, now

dead, somehow alive and in control. Until this novella, very little of your work has included fantastical elements. What led you to incorporate this idea, and what challenges did it pose for you?

It was pretty challenging: this was fairly far outside my comfort zone. Nothing I've written—book, essay, audio fiction, nothing—has taken me as long to actually finish. And I think much of the difficulty stemmed from my lack of generative experience with a narrative whose world's rules allowed for such flexibility. It took a while for me to understand (in a quantifiable way) that, at the end of the day, anything was possible on the page, which was a boon—but that also became its own burden. *Anything* was possible on the page. So there was a lot of trial and error for calibrating what, specifically, best served the story.

But, for better and worse, I'm always interested in figuring out what my narrative limits are, and at least trying to push at them a bit with each project. And, subject-wise, this isn't too far from my wheelhouse: questions of connections and community, and the infinite forms those can take, feel perpetually fascinating to me, largely owing to their inexhaustibility. For a few years, I was writing this novella alongside my upcoming novel, "Family Meal," and questions surrounding queer friendship, home, and intimacy pinged back and forth between both projects. So, in some thematic regards, they're an A- and B-side of each other; but it still felt important to siphon their respective narrative integrities into their separate universes. I'm working on something now whose DNA isn't entirely dissimilar from this narrative, but given how long the novella took me I wouldn't hold my breath.

In either case, I wanted to write a narrative oscillating between digital and "real" life, insofar as there's a difference (which is another question I was interested in). The challenge was pulling that off in a way that didn't feel didactic. And video games have, on and off, been pretty important to me and my conception of community. (Lately, if I'm gaming, it's probably Apex Legends, Pokémon GO, or Animal Crossing—although I've just finished *A Year of Springs* and *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist*, which I loved.) And I've always been a fan of

Mamoru Hosoda's works, especially the way in which reality is blended with the digital world ("Summer Wars," "Belle," and "Digimon: Our War Game!" immediately come to mind.) Plus, sitting with narratives such as N. K. Jemisin's "The City We Became" and Kim Bo-Young's "On the Origin of Species and Other Stories" (translated by Sora Kim-Russell and Joungmin Lee Comfort) was deeply helpful, too; their less-than-real elements serve as vibrant foundations, in lieu of simply being additive details. And it was only after I was pretty deep into the novella that I read Gabrielle Zevin's "Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow," which was a stroke of luck for me—that book is astounding, and if I'd started "Server" any later I would've given up.

But, eventually, once the novella's concerns solidified themselves, and I'd spent more time with each character, the labor of finishing a draft became more literal than metaphorical. Which I'm amenable to. And, as usual, music helped: I wrote the first and final drafts of this in Osaka, listening to a lot of Tendre. "Lobster," by onthedal, Tina Turner's "Let's Stay Together," and "Weight," by Paellas, were also on heavy rotation. And I played a song called "About Love," by off the menu, incessantly in the last few weeks of edits.

The narrator works at a prep school in Osaka for students who risk failing out of the education system unless they pass a year-end test. It's a kind of last-chance situation. There's a sense in which the narrator's contact with Vic, in the video game, also represents a last chance. What are the parallels here?

I'm always interested in the different forms that a narrative clock can take: given the project's length, it felt especially important to codify a clear organizing principle for the reader, especially as the novella leaned deeper into its more fantastical elements (the game's world). The prospect of an exam, and its attendant deadline, is something you can reasonably put a finger on: no matter what else is going on in the narrative, a significant component within its stakes remains clear. The same is probably true of the narrator's in-game quest with Vic—they're searching for something, and presumably they'll find it by the end of the narrative. Unless they don't. Either way, those structures bookmark

the narrative, which creates a lot of malleability for the questions asked in between.

But as far as last-chance situations go—it's an illusion, right? Albeit an effective one, with terribly significant consequences. Sustained by—among other things—the whims of capitalism. Opportunity ebbs and flows (until it eventually disappears, as it will for us all), but the end is never really the actual end until it's the end. Much of what an “ending” looks like depends upon your proximity to wealth, whiteness, ableness, the patriarchy, or any number of other privileges depending on your geographic situation. And I think what felt most interesting to me inside those paradigms, in my fiction, are the ways in which individuals find and form communities when they're approached with the spectres of seemingly earth-shattering transition points in their preëxisting structures (or the paradigms they've been *told* to accept).

In either case, for both narrative lines, their conclusions rest upon the characters' realizing that there's a life beyond what they've been told is the end. The journey resides in figuring out how to form structures and support systems and (in the narrator's case) found families that actually make them feel O.K.

The narrator gets into a casual—and then more serious—relationship with a Japanese man named Ren, who has a small son, Kota. Ren is not only the romantic interest here; he and Kota are an opportunity for some serious disquisitions on food. I think of you as one of the great contemporary writers of food in fiction. Why do you lend so much attention to the subject, and who are some of the other fiction writers whose engagement with food you admire?

It's funny—I'm still a little resistant to being called a food writer (despite very obviously existing in that space for a minute now). But, more so than the meals themselves (which are great, and lots of fun to write about), I'm more interested in questions surrounding pleasure, desire, labor, debt, need, and how folks come together (or don't, literally and metaphorically). Sex is especially useful as a narrative device on those fronts, and I've inadvertently found that food creates a

foundation to launch similar conversations and questions within the contexts I'm interested in.

The challenge is when food in a narrative becomes a means to opt out of addressing, or spending time with, the questions underlying and surrounding it—because food is front-facing as “easier,” or more “comfortable” or “relatable,” to talk about. I think an obstacle for queer fiction in the States—particularly as local and national legislation continues to actively attack and destabilize queer folks across the country—is the ways in which publishers and publishing entities will obfuscate a narrative's queerness in favor of what's deemed, in their view, more “relatable,” or less “contentious.” It's especially an issue for folks looking to debut queer work: the queerness is allowed, so to speak, only if it can be masked by literally anything else, if it's even allowed into the market at all. Which is extremely frustrating to watch. But to answer your question: for me, at least, food in my fiction is a catalyst that's useful only for what narrative possibility it yields.

Among folks writing in English, C Pam Zhang is wonderful with food—especially, lately, in “Land of Milk and Honey.” Chris Gonzalez's “I'm Not Hungry but I Could Eat” is brilliant, and really expanded my mind. Chang-rae Lee's gustatory thoughtfulness is really marvellous (“My Year Abroad” especially), and Monique Truong's work means so much to me; when she uses food in her fiction, it's both magical on its own and a multivalent portal. And it's not about *food*, per se, but Dolki Min's “Walking Practice” (translated by Victoria Caudle)—about appetites, desire, queerness, and pleasure—is one of my favorite books I've read in some time.

The novella length is sort of the sad kid of American fiction, too long for most publications, too short to be bound in hardcover and sold for thirty dollars. Besides length, what draws you to the form—what does it allow you to do?

I've been told this is strange, but novellas are the prose form that I've always been most taken by. And the one that most inspires me? It's served as a really useful organizing principle inside longer things that I've written (from explicitly

structural vantage points, and also implicit, thematic ones), and novellas remain the form that, to me, seems among the most difficult to stick the landing on. And maybe that's because the form's limitations allow for an expansiveness whose effectiveness is both wildly useful for creating emotional payoff, and simultaneously deeply unwieldy to corral.

But you've got just enough time, word-count wise, to set an ambience, and build a world, and form deep attachments to the characters without their presence becoming a burden. Some of the narratives that have stayed with me the longest are in that format: Banana Yoshimoto's "Kitchen" is a novella that radically altered my life's trajectory (alongside its companion in book form, "Moonlight Shadow"). Alejandro Zambra's "Bonsai" really did a number on me. "Down the Rabbit Hole," by Juan Pablo Villalobos, illustrated to me just how much *character* can be packed into a novella. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's "A Cat, a Man, and Two Women," César Aira's "The Little Buddhist Monk," Yoko Tawada's "The Bridegroom Was a Dog" (New Directions Publishing is phenomenal about publishing novellas), Choi Eunyoung's "Shoko's Smile" (in her namesake story collection), and Yoko Ogawa's novella collection "The Diving Pool" have all been deeply important to me. I'm deeply grateful to the translators who make reading these works in English possible.

And it's also worth underlining—as you noted—that this aversion to the novella as a form is deeply American. Which is typical and dumb. Quite a lot of confabulation with language occurs among Stateside publishers to present narratives that are, in actuality, novella length as novels. But whatever. I just want more novellas. And for folks to be *paid* for them. The form can hold a lot of importance for readers, and, as the market continues to shift, hopefully that emphasis does as well. ♦

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