

Interview with Jay Baron Nicorvo



Jay Baron Nicorvo's novel, *The Standard Grand* (St. Martin's Press), was picked for IndieBound's Indie Next List, *Library Journal's* Spring 2017 Debut Novels Great First Acts, and named "New and Noteworthy" by *Poets & Writers*. He's published a poetry collection, *Deadbeat* (Four Way), and his nonfiction can be found in *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Believer*. You can find out more about Jay at www.nicorvo.net.

Interviewer:

We must first start with the sentences.

Some samples from your opening (check out more [here](#)):

"Specialist Smith gunned the gas and popped the clutch in the early Ozark morning. Her Dodge yelped, slid to one side in the blue dark, then shot fishtailing forward. The rear tires burned a loud ten meters of smoking, skunky rubber out front of the stucco ranch house on Tidal Road."

"She sped out of the hotdamn Ozarks through the Mark Twain National Forest. She threw her ringing phone—Travy—out the window and into the parched summer. It smithereened in the rearview. She used her teeth to pull off her wedding band and engagement ring. Spat them into her hand and shoved them into the trash-crammed ashtray, mall-bought diamond solitaire be damned."

T. Geronimo Johnson, author of *Hold It Till It Hurts* and *Welcome to Braggsville*, once argued that writers should

consider the paragraph a sentence rather than limit themselves to movement between two individual periods (my rough–very rough–paraphrase). Your novel sparks from the first clause to the last, and each paragraph feels carefully crafted, as if itself a sentence. Can you give us some perspective on your syntactical choices?

Nicorvo:

Thanks, and I couldn't agree more with you and Mr. Johnson. I've got zero patience for shoddy craftsmanship. The neat masonry of reading in English, left to right, row after row, is a bit like brickwork. And writing is little more than masonry. Stacking, unstacking, restacking. If the basic building block is the word, than the syllable – where we're able to isolate the music, the meter, of each word – is my mortar. Sounds of words reverberating off one another, that holds my sentences together. The syntactical choices I make are often musical. If a word doesn't sound right, even if it has the right meaning, it's got to go.

And it sounds fussy, but I'm not satisfied with the perfectly uniform bricks you get at the big box stores. I like a flaw. Give me those old terracotta bricks cut by hand, no two alike. They've got a warmth, a life, a history and a heft you can feel in the hand. Sure, they're more brittle and difficult to work with – they smithereen – but that's part of the satisfaction. Each sentence, like each brick, should be radiant, alive, tell a story and have its own weight. No two alike. And so, too, each paragraph. That's how you get – ultimately and after interminable years – to the place where you've built, brick by brick, not just a whole novel but a whole world. But that thing I said earlier? That writing is little more than masonry? That's some bullshit right there.

Interviewer:

Your novel is one of the first to directly connect the experience of two American wars—Vietnam and Afghanistan/Iraq—both through the lens of establishment outsiders and post-traumatic stress disorder. Not coincidentally, anxiety runs through each page and each word, and the reader is often rewarded with poignant paragraphs like the following:

“She loved being on the road, when the road wasn’t going to explode beneath her. She gave it more gas. Milt leaned back as the van accelerated—slowly, surely—and reached the speed limit, 55. There she coasted. She was driving like an old lady. What’s state motto was Live Free or Die? Freedom was like war that way: if it didn’t make you nervous, you weren’t truly engaged in it. Driving, she felt anxious, she felt alive.”

What drew you to this subject and these points of view?

Nicorvo:

Well, I suppose I’m an outsider and I consider myself anti-establishment. I’m a civilian who wrote a war novel – though it’s really a post-war novel – so my perspective has to be farther from the frontline. This has its drawbacks. Harder for my point of view to have the immediacy – never mind the moral authority – of Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, Elliot Ackerman’s *Green on Blue*, or Matt Gallagher’s *Youngblood*. These are breathtaking novels by novelists who’ve had fingers on combat-weight triggers, and their stories are close-quarters. But every position has its disadvantages. The trick is to be aware of them, and then use that difference to possible advantage.

As an outsider, maybe I’m more inclined toward the long view,

from the homeland, but also historically. I can't help but see the invasion of Iraq – Afghanistan is different – through the warped lens of Vietnam, but through, too, as many other conflicts as I'm able. Civilians should feel obliged to read more about war, and some of them to try to write war. The author of the *Iliad* was a blind man. *The Red Badge of Courage* was written by a reporter. *A Farewell to Arms* is the work of an ambulance driver. *Tree of Smoke* was conceived by a hippy burnout. *The Sympathizer* came from an academic.

The late Tom Hayden is a bit of an easy target, a peacenik Freedom Rider and the second of Jane Fonda's three husbands, but there's a [quote of his I think about a lot](#): "If you conduct a war, you shouldn't be in charge of narrating it." I take this to mean that those who conduct our wars should be doing the narrating, but not *all* of the narrating, and I don't believe anyone should be in charge of who gets to tell a story. We've got no shortage of soldier writers. Oddly enough, though, they're mostly dudes in my demographic: white working-class. I say oddly. One of the most beautiful things about the American military is how the institution takes in all kinds – though it likes the poor kind best – and puts them on firm but equal footing. I can't think of a more meritocratic American institution – for men, at least, though the women are securing their rightful place – and in my mind that makes it ideally American (even if the real America is about how best to subtly tip the scales in your favor).

So I'm an outsider in some ways, not in others. I'm right up there on the emotional frontlines, for one. I was diagnosed with PTSD about a month before my agent sold the damn novel. I like to joke that novel writing – and trying to publish a novel – caused my traumatic stress. But the hard truth is that I've suffered from anxiety overload (as you so perfectly put it) all throughout my adulthood, induced by my childhood sexual abuse, something I kept largely secret for 35 years. Phil Klay's got a killer essay, "[After War, a Failure of the](#)

[Imagination](#),” that closes the gap between traumas. A funny thing about trauma – haha. The experience of it is absolutely singular. No two alike. You can never know my trauma. But the after-the-fact symptoms of trauma are all shared. That tourniquet chest. Those quick sipping breaths. The feeling like you’ve been here before and will, for fucking ever, be here again. Our emotional fallout is communal. You can’t know my trauma, but you can share my anxiety, because anxiety is contagious. Once I can overcome my anxiety – which is not the same as having no anxiety – then I can tell you the story of my trauma. In my experience, that’s one of the hardest things a person can learn to do, never mind do well.

Interviewer:

Irish novelist John Banville once said, “the world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language.” D.H. Lawrence famously wrote at length about the dramatic divide between the didactic and art. Yet, with a novel like yours, I feel “reality” and “language,” are not necessarily mutually exclusive (or the former the product of the latter exclusively). Further, you have written [powerful non-fiction](#) about the United States Code of Military Justice, Bowe Bergdhal, Trump, and the history of democracy. Particular political wrongs and historical injustices seem to motivate your writing. What, then, are your thoughts on the relationship between politics and art?

Nicorvo:

I don’t really recognize those dichotomies: reality, language; art, politics. In my fiction, I’m trying to make a recognizable reality using language. I’m doing the opposite in my nonfiction: trying to make reality recognizable using language. I’m not someone who believes all art is political,

all politics is artistry. Music can be apolitical, I think. But writing, as an art form, has to be political. There's no way around it; it's guilt by association. They both traffic in the same medium: words. Novels and laws require nouns and verbs. The US Constitution isn't a piano concerto or saxophone solo.

Maybe because I grew up poor – sometimes on welfare, sometimes off – I've long thought the system was rigged. But one thing I learned pretty early was that command of language is a way to overcome some of the trappings of that system. Because our language shapes our reality. This, in part, determines the resistance to political correctness. When people try to shape our language, it quickly comes to feel like mind control. It's authoritarian. What Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief" required for immersion into a good story might more accurately be classified as a willing surrender to authority.

Reading is submission to mind control. And some people can't take it. The reader gives up his inner self for a time – in what should be understood, in this egocentric age, as nothing short of heroism. When you read, you allow the writer, in this case me, to take up residence in your head. While you read this, your thoughts don't exist apart from mine, as I've here expressed them. This is, in part, what gives the word of God, as captured in the Bible, its control. Most of us have only a tentative grasp on the extent of this power – here's where politics comes in – but all of us feel its sway.

In my writing, what I'm aiming to do is to honor the trust you've given me – the leap of faith you're willing to take – by choosing to read what I've written. The way I best know how to hold up my end of this bargain is by making the effort to write about our most difficult issues – the wrongs and injustices – in a way that doesn't try to put them in a good light or a bad light but in a true light. If I do, you can tell, because the light hums.

Interviewer:

A lengthy author's note in the back of *The Standard Grand* lists a wide variety of source material. Your epigraph includes a quote from a Josh Ritter, a contemporary country singer. You have told me that particular television shows like *Rectify* inspired moments in *The Standard Grand*. Not all artists are comfortable acknowledging the collaborative nature of an artistic project. Some would resist lumping different mediums together into fiction. Obviously, you have no anxiety of influence. How did you come to this expansive (and refreshing!) view of the art of the novel?

Nicorvo:

Failure. I'm a firm believer in failure. And debt. One of the dumbest things F. Scott Fitzgerald ever wrote, in *The Last Tycoon*, was that "there are no second acts in American lives." That reflects the backwards thinking of someone born into excessive privilege, where there's no where to go but down. Look no further than the White House. America, where our pariahs become president. I've found that there's nothing more expansive than failure if, ultimately, it's overcome. And a debt repaid offers significant gratification. But if you succumb to your failings, if you're overwhelmed by your debts, well, there's nothing more isolating and suffocating. An awful feeling, getting choked out by the world. Failure imparts humility. Hopefully, it's balanced out by a dram or two of success now and then. Otherwise, you're reduced to sniveling, that or the tortured thinking of the conspiracy theorist or the lone gunman. If you're lucky and stubborn enough to meet some eventual success after multiple failures – *The Standard Grand*, my first published novel, is the fourth one I've finished – I think you're instilled with an increased capacity

for gratitude. Because I have a great deal of influence anxiety – maybe more than my fair share – but it's overshadowed by my gratitude. We vastly overestimate our independence. Especially in this country. And among writers, it's no big secret that we take a great deal, knowingly and unknowingly, from everyone and everything around us, in order to finish what we make. I wanted to go on record acknowledging that I am not owed. I owe.