

“I Like the Real Stuff”—WBT Interviews Ben Fountain

Ben Fountain, the award-winning author of Brief Encounters with Che Guevera, Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk, and, most recently, Beautiful Country Burn Again, was kind enough to invite two WBT editors, Matthew Hefti and Mike Carson, into his Dallas home for lunch and an interview this past month. The interview took place at a dining room table piled high with well-organized stacks of reading material (including Ulysses S Grant’s annotated memoirs and at least a year’s worth of New York Review of Books back issues) and surrounded by a colorful selection of Haitian and Mexican folk art. Fountain got things going by asking us if we were sure we were recording. A reporter from another publication recently failed to record his interview with Fountain on two separate occasions. That person should know better, Fountain explained (using a choice expletive), as redoing an interview is the “most painful thing.” Fountain’s speech mirrors the concerns of his writing. He is always searching for the right word, and adds on to what he has already said with words like “just” and “like” and “and,” not because he can’t find a useful or appropriate word or simile, but because he wants to find one that is truly tethered to experience, to details, to the real, and he is aware of just how much of our language has been emptied out, “un-moored,” as he says in the interview. His refusal to abide linguistic insincerity and passionate commitment to (and faith in) authentic human experience is a source of inspiration for these interviewers and the whole WBT team. You can read a review of his most recent book [here](#) and buy it [here](#).

—WBT



WBT: Walker Percy. No one talks about him much anymore yet you, in an early interview, put him down as an important

influence. How did Walker Percy influence your writing?

BF: I discovered him in college. I graduated college in 1980, and that year he was the hot guy in American fiction. He had this slow build to his career. And each step, you know, he got stronger. By the late '70s, he was at his peak in terms of reputation. And he'd also gone to Chapel Hill. And he was a southerner. He had figured out a way to take Southern literature beyond Faulkner. It seemed like the generation after Faulkner everybody was kind of working in the same vein, the same idiom, and Walker Percy figured out a way to make it new, to keep it genuine and authentic, but also take it to the contemporary world, and find a different medium, a different language for it.

You know, I'm sure he's very out of favor right now, because of the way he wrote about women especially. And I'm sure certain views of race haven't aged well, at all. But I think there's a lot that's worthwhile in his writing, I mean a tremendous amount, and so I still think of him quite a bit. And I can't read him when I'm writing my own stuff, because his voice is too powerful, his vibe. But I do appreciate the way he used humor. I think there's this notion in American letters, this attitude, that if it's not depressing the hell out of me, then it must not be profound or important. I think the really great writers use all 88 keys on the keyboard, like everything from humor, to pathos, to utmost tragedy. [Gabriel] Garcia Marquez does it, and I think Walker Percy was really, really good at humor. So I paid attention to that when I started reading him and still do.

WBT: We've come across people who find humor in your writing and describe it as satirical. Do you consider yourself a satirist?

BF: I think satire is different than humor. My notion of satire is exaggeration. You take reality, and you push it at least one step further. The classic example of that is "A Modest Proposal" by Jonathan Swift, where he says, "we'll let the rich eat Irish babies." God forbid we ever actually get to the point where someone seriously proposes that. To me, that

is satire. I think I'm a straight-up realist. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is not satire. Because everything that happens in that book, either had happened, was happening, or has happened since. So it's just straight-up realism, and if there is humor in it, the humor, hopefully, just comes out of who the people are and the nature of the situation. I think people cracking jokes is just a basic part of human experience. I mean even in the concentration camps—people were making jokes. I'm not saying they were doing it a lot, but it's just a basic component of human nature. In *Billy Lynn*, every time you get a group of guys together, within 4-5 hours, they have this inside joke that's going on and it's constant. There's a lot of laughter. So, satire and humor, I would say satire can be humorous, but they aren't necessarily the same thing.

WBT: Much of your writing focuses on history. Do you do a lot of historical research when writing fiction and, when you have free time, do you read history or fiction?

Both. There's always the thing you need to read specifically, either for background or direct knowledge. I had the idea for *Billy Lynn* in 2004, and I didn't start writing until 2009. I was working on other things, but I had the notion for it, and I started making notes. You know, it's a sign when the notes keep coming that maybe you got something here. So my default reading for the next five years was about these wars. Because if there wasn't anything pressing, whether in I needed it for work, or just something I really wanted to read for my own pleasure, I was always reading about these wars, about Iraq and Afghanistan, just because I thought if I'm going to make a run at this *Billy Lynn* story, I want to have this deep background. And that's where my head and my heart lead me anyway. It felt very important to me to try to understand these wars and all the levels of experience that go into them.

WBT: Did you read war writing and fiction from previous wars in preparation for Billy Lynn? Or did you just focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

I mostly focused on this recent war, and nonfiction accounts,

like long-form journalism. There's been a lot of really good long-form, like magazine journalism, written about these wars by very talented writers at *Rolling Stone*, *Harpers*, and in daily newspaper accounts. My stack of periodicals and newspaper clippings probably got about this [points to the space next to his chair], three feet high. They're all in a file somewhere, but I'm just trying to immerse myself.

WBT: When you're writing fiction, when you're actually in the middle of a novel or a short story, do you read fiction by other writers? Do you ever worry about their work influencing yours?

I mean certain people—their voice is too strong. I can't read Saul Bellow while I'm writing. And I shouldn't read Joan Didion while I'm in middle of heavy duty, writing my own work, because they'll bleed into my stuff. But the more I've done this work, and just the more I have seemed to dial into my own signal, the less of a concern that is; it's like I'm a little more immune to this bleed over of styles. I always try to keep some poetry going, because I think it's good for prose writers to stay in touch with that wonderful compression of language, and I do usually have a fiction book going on the bedside table.

WBT: Is there a poet you return to most often?

Yeah. Those I read are all almost contemporary poets. I could not pick out one in particular. But there's a lot of really fine poetry being written right now, as we're kind of in a golden age. Obviously, no one is making money at it, but there are a lot of fine poets doing great work, and lots of little publishers bringing out their books and these beautiful additions. Poetry is thriving in this country right now.

WBT: Do you ever write poetry?

No. It's too hard. It's like look at the poets—they're the Formula One of writing whereas prose writers are like NASCAR. We kind of trundle around the track in these hunks of junk and Formula One is all purity and elegance. No, I'm going to stick

with the stock car.

WBT: You've written acclaimed short stories, acclaimed essays, and an acclaimed novel. Which genre do you feel most comfortable in?

I think I'm a fiction writer. At least I want to be a fiction writer. When the opportunity came along for the essays in *Beautiful Country*, when the Guardian said, do you want to write about the 2016 election for us? I thought, yeah, I really want to do that. I had been dissatisfied with that kind of writing I've done in the past; it was like I hadn't figured it out yet. So I thought, I really want to study these elections, figure out what's going on, and I also want to get better at this kind of work. But starting out I didn't know if I could do it properly—go out on the road and on campaigns. And then a book came out of that, and I'm happy with the result. I'm at peace with it. Let's put it that way. It's like, I did the best I could, and didn't take any shortcuts, and I didn't take any cheap shots. Whatever shots were in there, they [the politicians] deserved it. I now know if the need arises, I can write like that, and there's a chance I can do a good job. But I'm working on a novel now set in Haiti, and I'm really happy working on it. I'm getting these chances to write about the election coming up in 2020, and I'm trying to say no, because I'm happy working on a novel.

WBT: Speaking of other genres, your short story "Fantasy of Eleven Fingers" has always struck me as somewhat anomalous in your short story collection Brief Encounters with Che Guevara. What is the genesis of that story?

My kids. I made them take piano when they were growing up. I would always sit there at recitals where I could see the kids' hands. And I was just, you know, sitting there for a recital once and these are normally bright kids—I mean no prodigies here—these are just kids who applied themselves, and you're looking at their hands. And I was thinking, My God, this was really amazing, you know, what these kids are doing with their fingers. And it just came to me: What would it be like if you threw an extra finger in there? The idea sailed in there

randomly. I walked around with it for a few days after thinking about that extra finger and it started to coalesce—for whatever reason—around fin-de-siècle Vienna and Jewishness.



WBT: Music is an important element in that story. I also noticed many song references in many of the Beautiful Country Burn Again essays. What is the relationship between music and writing for you? Do you listen to music when you write?

No. I never have music on when I'm writing at home. As for the music references—it's just that there's a lot of music around these campaign events I went to. It seemed like part of the fabric of the story. Like, you know, describing Trump's playlist at that rally in Iowa, and just how eclectic it was and the crowd's like half-conscious reaction to it; or, at the Bernie rally, at the end, they're playing "Star Man" from Bowie—*Here's a star man waiting in the sky*—and just as the event cleared out, down on the arena floor, there are a bunch of kids doing a whirling dervish, that deadhead thing. I thought that I needed to record that. That has a place in there somewhere, these little whirlpools of ecstasy going on, eddying in the wake of this Bernie event, and, honestly, it just seemed a natural part of the story to weave in those songs.

WBT: In Billy Lynn you have strange text breaks where the words begin to float away. In Beautiful Country Burn Again you have mini-chapters called "Book of Days" that also break up the text. What are you trying to accomplish with these breaks?

In Billy Lynn I call them "word clouds." They are kind of floating all over the page. By the time I started writing it I felt that there were certain words that had become detached from reality in the culture. They were used but they no longer signified what they originally did. They had become something else. In a way they had become not signifiers of realities but ways to obscure reality. You know, I thought if I heard George W. Bush say "supreme sacrifice" one more time I'm just going to fucking knock my head against the wall. It was bullshit. You could tell that often they weren't even thinking about what they were saying; it was so automatic, like "they have made the extreme sacrifice." There were a lot of words like that—"9/11," "terrorism," "war on terror." It's like you hear those words and your brain shuts off. And, I was trying to

think, how do you get that on the page, just like they're no longer tethered to lived experience. I thought I would have them kind of float around, and kind of like in this fog. So that was me acting out of desperation, trying to figure out a way to get as close to the experiences as I could, or at least the experience I was having of language unmoored. I just thought, well, there will be times when Billy's hearing those words and they are no longer lines that you know, they're no longer in orderly progression, they're just kind of floating.

The Book of Days [in *Beautiful Country Burn Again*] was also a solution to a problem. So much happened in 2016. It really was an intense year, an extreme year, and a violent year, and a surreal year. And so how do you set up that context for these discrete events that I'm writing about without overloading the beginning of the chapter? It's like so much happens in the month before the NRA convention in Louisville. How am I going to shotgun that in and give people a proper sense of the context? So I took a clue from *Harper's Magazine*, in their weekly blast, where they would shotgun all this stuff that happened in a given month. I thought, all right. Let's try that. I felt like that's probably the most efficient way to do it.

WBT: That makes sense. It was very hard to for me to read those sections. It felt like like an assault at times.

BF: I wanted it to be an assault. Because it was. And we forget quickly. It was a wild year. Leading up the Republican Convention there had been 6-bloody weeks. And not just in the U.S. There was the truck attack in Nice, France that killed 80 people and the shootings in Dallas at the Black Lives Matter rally the week before the convention. Then, just when we get to the convention, on that Sunday, there's somebody shooting cops in Baton Rouge. So you're arriving in Cleveland, and you're thinking, what's next? Whatever is going to happen is going to happen here. Well, you know, amazingly it didn't. Nothing happened. Except Trump getting nominated. It was a wild year. I think we forget that quickly. It's just the nature of life these days. Something new is always coming at us.

WBT: You write a lot about the shortage of America's collective memory. What is your first individual memory?

BF: The very first?

WBT: Yes.

BF: [Long pause] All right. My dad was getting his PhD at Carolina. He was a TA, so he was making starvation wages, and he had 3 kids, and a wife to support, and so money was really tight. My first memory was graduate student housing, there on the campus at Chapel Hill, and I'm sure it was falling down. Anyway, my first memory I think is being in a crib, like with bars, with that white enamel paint. I have a memory of those bars and white enamel paint, some of it chipped, and being sick. Down the hall there's the sound of cartoons playing and also the smell of pork chops. My mom was frying pork chops. It's just a powerful sensory memory and maybe it crystallizes around being sick.

WBT: WBT is run by veterans and the family members of veterans, so we enjoyed the chapter on chickenhawks and Ambrose Bierce in Beautiful Country Burn Again, and we, of course, loved Billy Lynn's Halftime Walk. Where did your interest in the military come from?

BF: Well, I come from a very non-military family. Like we go when we are drafted. But I grew up in North Carolina, eastern North Carolina. And there were a lot of soldiers around growing up, like our neighbor in Kinston was a sergeant major in the Army. He had been at the Battle of the Bulge and was a career, noncommissioned officer. Soldiers and veterans were all over the place. And I was a normally, savage, bloodthirsty little boy. I was really into wars and reading about wars. Some kids like to play with trucks and erector sets. I liked to play with soldiers and guns. I was always very conscious of that part of history and always reading about it and am always conscious of it being around me. I thought at one point when I started writing *Billy Lynn* that I've known veterans of American wars going back to World War One. I may have even

crossed paths with a veteran of the Spanish American War. I was born in '58, so it's entirely possible, growing up in the South also, where everybody's ancestors fought. My great-grandfather enlisted in the Confederate Army when he was 18 or 19 in 1861. Our generations are long in my family. For most people my age, it's their great great grandfather or great great great grandfather, but for me, it's my great grandfather. So that history, at least to me, and a lot of other people in that place and time, the Civil War felt very present. And also North Carolina was so rural back then that if you stood a certain way, it could be 1863 again. There was nothing modern within sight. There might be an old harrow or piece of farm equipment sitting out, unchanged from 1860. The landscape of it was very present.

We discuss military obsessions in Southern writers like Barry Hannah, William Faulkner, and Walker Percy, and how this doomed military past often permeates the consciousness of the southern male.

BF: They were doing a documentary on Tim O'Brien this last year, and I got to talk to him for a few hours. He and I got talking about the Civil War and he asked me if my ancestors fought for the Confederacy. And I said, "yeah, they did." And he said, "are you proud of them?" I said, "yeah, I am." And he pressed me on it. He said, "Why are you proud of them?" Well, it's conflicted. They did their duty as they saw it. They risked themselves. But he was really pressing me on it. He was not being just polite. And I was like, okay, let's get real. Let's get down and dirty. Let's talk about this assumption I've been walking around with my whole life. They went off and did their duty. They fought and risked their lives. Yet it was for the absolutely, absolutely the wrong side.

My great grandfather, he was in a private school, a small private school. He and all his classmates enlisted with their schoolmaster. The schoolmaster became their sergeant. He must have been a pretty charismatic man. In 1863 the schoolmaster got killed. In a letter my great grandfather says of the schoolmaster, "he died hard." The schoolmaster was wounded and it took him a week to die. He was the mentor of all those

kids. They must have been shattered, to watch him suffer, like that, their hero. My grandfather comes home and marries that man's little sister. There's some powerful bonding in that group. They just saw it like this, like okay, boys, the war's on, let's go join up. And you wonder what they are thinking. It's like—I'm not staying behind.

Long interval where the WBT editors discuss our own choices at 18 and 19 to participate in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and whether or not we would have made the right choice in other historical circumstances and what the right choice is (or was).



WBT: Over lunch, we talked to you and your wife Sharon about the move from North Carolina to Dallas 37 years ago, and the 5 years you worked as a real estate and bankruptcy lawyer before turning to writing full time. At one point you said, "I've made my peace with Texas." What did you mean by this?

When I came to Dallas, I interviewed for a job here. I was coming here because Sharie was a year ahead of me in law school. So I was visiting her here and I was thinking, Oh, this is pretty much like North Carolina. I was lucky in North Carolina to grow up around a lot of really fine adults. That was my sense of it, then. And looking back on North Carolina, you know, as a person of some experience, I think it's still, by and large, true. Like these were people, a lot of them had real integrity and principles, and they paid the price for it at various times, but they were real role models. You know, I'm sure a big part of that perception is me being young, and just not understanding the complexities of things, but I also think there's some truth to it.

So I came here, and one of the signals was people kept asking me who's the richest man in North Carolina. I said that it never occurred to me. Nobody talks that way. Whereas in Texas, there's these lists, you know, who's the richest mofo in Texas, and every year you get these lists. In North Carolina, whoever the richest person was, he or she damn sure didn't want to be on any list. Plus no one really had any money. In every town, the richest three men were the Coca-Cola bottler, the guy who owned the tobacco warehouse, and maybe the lawyer or doctor, but everybody else was middle class at best. Whereas, you know, you come to Texas and money—just materialism and conspicuous consumption—is part of the air you breathe.

WBT: Do you think that's uniquely Dallas? Or Texas?

BF: I think it's Texas. I think it's very Texas and it's very, very Dallas. In Dallas and Houston you get the purest strain of that kind of Texanism. When I went to my firm in Dallas, I was thinking it was going to be people like the lawyers I'd grown up around, like those I worked with as a summer associate and as a page in the legislature for four months. These lawyers back in North Carolina, they—at least in my experience—taught me this is how you should be in the world. You stand for certain things, and you work for certain things, and money is not the main thing. In North Carolina I'm living a certain kind of life and being part of the community—that's

the main thing. Then again, that's an adolescent's and a youth's perspective, and yet it still feels pretty genuine to me. So I came here, and in the legal profession, money was in your face. It really was different. I'm not finding any Atticus Finches around here.

I mean I was around a lot of good people in Dallas, but not as many and not to the degree that I assumed I would be. I was also around a lot of people I did not respect. So that, and just how powerful capitalist culture is here, almost to the exclusion of virtually any other awareness that there might be different ways. It's like what else is there besides the free market? Who wouldn't want to have this no-holds-barred survival-of-the-fittest society?

But I made peace with it. There are certain things to be said for this kind of life. It's a very dynamic, energetic place, and lots of amazing things happen. Texas Instruments changed the history of the world. And that's just one example of the innovation and dynamism and initiative both corporate and individual. It's important to recognize the good, but there remains a lot that unsettles me or strikes me as inauthentic.

WBT: What time of day do you write? Is it a set time? Or do you let the inspiration strike you?

BF: I've always treated my writing like a job. I get up in the morning with everybody else, see the kids off to school, start writing until lunch, eat lunch, lie down for 20 minutes to clear my head, then get up and write some more until it was time to pick up the kids from schools. The kids are grown now, but it's still basically the same schedule. Get up, give it most of the hours of the working day, and the best hours. And that decision—am I going to write today?—is already answered. Yes, you're going to write today. It would drive me crazy to get up in the mornings and ask: Am I going to write today? Should I write now? Should I wait until later? I can't do it. It's too much indecision.

WBT: Would you consider yourself a southern writer? Or are categories like these unhelpful?

I think it's a legitimate category. It's a legitimate way to start thinking about certain things—different traditions in American letters and placeness and particularities and peculiarities of history and geography. It's a starting point. But I didn't want to be one of those Southern writers. I don't have anything against this type of writer. Jill McCorkle and a number of other people in North Carolina and around North Carolina, they are Southern writers. They are working Southern history and Southern culture. But I wanted to do something different. I wanted to go in a different direction. You know, I've felt guilty because I didn't read as much Faulkner as I was supposed to. Being a Southerner and a writer, you're told you should read every single word that Faulkner wrote. It's just that certain writers grab you and hold and others you see the good in them but there's not that visceral connection. When I discovered the Latin American writers, and started reading them systematically, I discovered they had really gone to school on Faulkner. I thought, okay, I'm getting my Faulkner. It's being filtered through Latin America. That helped me get over my Faulkner guilt.

WBT: Which Latin American writers?

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is the master. [Julio] Cortázar, [Mario] Vargas Llosa, [Jorge Luis] Borges, [Clarice] Lispector. There are huge gaps in my familiarity with Latin American literature, but the things I do know feel very relevant. It's like Garcia Marquez especially. That's writing. I can't try to imitate him but the scope and the spirit of it—

WBT: The magic and the humor and the wonder?

BF: Yeah, but also how it is incredibly grounded in human experience. Salman Rushdie is a writer that people hold up as a 2nd generation magical realist. But his work doesn't ring true to me because it feels untethered. His magical realism isn't as grounded in the real as Marquez. Marquez's understanding of the world, and how it works, and how people behave, it just seems very profound to me and it is not as strong in Rushdie. That's true of some other writers who have

gone the magical-realist route. Garcia Marquez is not magical.

WBT: You described your work as realist earlier. Is this what you meant?

BF: Human experience is so complex. Take *Beloved* [by Toni Morrison], which I think is a great American novel. There's a lot of talk about the metaphorical aspect, the symbolism and the magical realism. I'm not so sure. She's profoundly real. It just takes a little shift in the shadows. Like place the light over here instead of over here, and it's as real as anything in life. Whatever trauma and angst and pain is bound up in that is fucking real. I don't like symbols very much. I like the real stuff.

WBT: Then, strangely, labels like magical realism actually work to limit the possibilities of reality?

BF: If you aren't careful, yes. It's shorthand. Marquez is magical realism, but that's a start. It shouldn't limit the discussion. Human experience is so complex and deep and varied and leveled and layered. Are ghosts real? What exactly do we mean when we say ghosts? If we are talking about the past, in the present, and the past in us, and in our psyches, and in our families, ghosts may be a way of talking about that, embodying that. There's a mystery there that maybe we shouldn't sweat so much. We should let be, and acknowledge, and try to portray it as authentically as we can.



Author Bio:

Ben Fountain's most recent book is *Beautiful Country Burn*

Again: Democracy, Rebellion, and Revolution, and is based on the Pulitzer Prize-nominated essays and reportage that he wrote on the 2016 presidential election for *The Guardian*. He is also the author of a novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, and a short story collection, *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*. His work has received the National Book Critics' Circle Award for Fiction, the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction, the Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize, and a Whiting Writer's Award, and has been a finalist for the National Book Award in both the U.S. and the U.K. (international authors division). His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Le Monde*, *IntranQu'îllités* (Haiti), *Esquire*, *The Paris Review*, *Harper's*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, and elsewhere.