

Web Exclusive Interview: Merrill Feitell

In December's web exclusive story, "[The Cupcake Factory](#)," we bear witness to a moment between siblings that we know will become, for one of them, a searing memory. We know because it's told as if the scene is already crystallizing as it unfolds, and with a weight that can only manifest for him down the line. It's an exercise in recognizing ourselves, and in being in multiple places at once: in the present and in the future, looking back at the past. We talked to author Merrill Feitell about how it came about.



Erin McReynolds: When you submitted "The Cupcake Factory," I think you alluded to it as being part of a bigger collection of linked stories. Can you talk a bit about that?

Merrill Feitell: For more than a decade, I've been working on a novel called *Any Minute Now*. (Hilarious, no?) Because I lack the capacity to write through an extended series of events in a linear fashion, the project has taken shape as a series of flashes. "The Cupcake Factory" is one of them.

And this particular version of "The Cupcake Factory" is just one of several flashes that reimagine the same scene, allowing this pair of siblings to play out various dimensions of their dynamic while hanging around atop these trucks.

I'd planned on using just one version in the project, but I couldn't seem to pick. I was grouching about this indecision to the ingenious poet Matt Hart and he asked me why I had to pick—*why not just write a whole book that was all cupcake factories?*

Obviously, this seemed like an asinine idea—until I started thinking that the fragmentation and repetition of the flashes together might actually work in service of the overall story, capturing the siblings' repeated behavior patterns; the cycles of violence in their household; their jittery nature; the haunting images of their father's suicide; and the subjectivity and fragility of

memory.

So there are now several series of flashes interspersed throughout the project—a cupcake factory series; a family road trip series; a series about renaming the siblings' rock band. Each flash is meant to be a cohesive whole—but each series also takes on a narrative progression over the course of the manuscript. To keep it all clear in my head, I periodically print the whole thing on multi-colored paper, ascribing a color to each series of flashes. I always print The Cupcake Factories on blue, so the blue sheets crop up every 40 pages or so.

I've published some of this work as individual flashes and some as a series, like a short story. If I ever finish, it's probably equally likely for the final product to end up assembled as a novel or as linked stories.

EM: What an undertaking! So are there other versions of this cupcake factory scene in which it's not implied that Stapleton's sister is going to attempt suicide? What else gets played out in those versions?

MF: In one version, they have a party inside an empty truck and in another, Stapleton tries to get a girl to have sex. I guess there's always some sort of threat lurking, but not always suicide.

EM: What I love so much about this story is the fluidity of the narrative perspective: It starts off reporting; then gets close, inside Stapleton; then addresses the reader, before moving back out again to this perspective that declares something Stapleton "almost knows," and asks us to forgive him. I read this as Stapleton's telling of the story, from a traumatized place of loss and shame. That semi-omniscient perspective in the end being his hindsight. Am I off-base?

MF: No, you're not off base at all. These stories seemed to defy being written in my go-to close third. I think this is because each story is out to illuminate a family dynamic—how a group of individuals work (and fail to work) together. A single POV seemed too biased.

Sometimes I find it useful to imagine that the narrative voice somehow belongs to the deceased father—as if his voice has been absorbed by the floorboards of the family house, sort of saturating everyone's consciousness. The father had always been a real hard-ass, and so the whole family has been trained to incorporate his nay-saying logic into their own thinking. The *you-should've-known-better!* stuff is very much driven by the absent father's logic coming through Stapleton's sensibility.

In puzzling through the voice, I spent a lot of time reading Robert Boswell's essay "On Omniscience" from his book *Half-Known World*. I'm not sure I earn this omniscient POV in all the ways Boswell describes, but that essay is definitely inspiring and helpful.

EM: I just ordered this book from the shop down the street, to add to my aspirational pile of unread books. A friend said buying a writing book is like buying a diet book; you're really buying the hope you will at last be transformed. What are your top three writing books?

MF: That's funny! Now that I live in LA, I listen to a lot of lectures and interviews while in my car—there's far less shame in a stocked playlist than in a fat stack of unread books. On YouTube, there's a [Hilton Als/Junot Diaz interview](#) from the Strand that I really love, and in print, I'd say my faves are Boswell's *Half-Known World* and *The Art of Series*, which is also put out by Graywolf.

EM: What's the significance of placing this searing memory in the parking lot of a Hostess factory?

MF: I never thought about this consciously, but I suppose I liked the irony of a completely miserable childhood so close to a spot where even the air is delicious. And even though the characters never get *inside* the factory—they're never right there where the world's dessert cakes are injected with delicious cream filling!—they're masochistic enough to keep subjecting themselves to everything that's off limits, hanging around as close as they can get.

EM: What are you working on lately? What's got your interest?

MF: I'm currently working on a short story about a woman living in a tent with broken tent poles and how difficult it is to Google "tent-pole repair" with tent fabric collapsing on your head all the time.

I'm also at work on a nonfiction project, a collection of multi-media essays and video narratives called *Going With Fergus: A Möbius Atlas*, which is about living out of my car with my dog throughout my dad's terminal decline.

And, of course, I remain at work on *Any Minute Now*, which I swear I'm going to finish—any minute now . . .

[clear-line]

Merrill Feitell's first book, *Here Beneath Low-Flying Planes*, won the Iowa Short Fiction Award. She is at work on a novel and a series of multi-media essays and she's also fiction editor at *Forklift, Ohio: A Journal of Poetry, Fiction, and Light Industrial Safety*. She lives on the edge of Los Angeles.