

Web Exclusive Interview: Michael Czyzniejewski



In August, we published a Web Exclusive story, "[Monster](#)," that seemed fitting (given that it was playground season and all) and creepy. But not creepy in the way you'd think—the unexpected twist of this story lodges itself in the place where our inadequacies lie, and it's comforting to be so recognized, isn't it? We talked to author Michael Czyzniejewski about this last month.

Erin McReynolds: Your narrator in "Monster" is super relatable—in this era of social media, we're making constant comparisons between ourselves and people we think we ought to be more like. It seems extra bad for parents, who shame each other ruthlessly. What was the first part of this story that came to you—when did you know you had to write it?

Michael Czyzniejewski: The easy answer to this is that I'm a parent who takes his kids to playgrounds all the time, several times a week, and playgrounds are absolute feasts for bizarre behavior-watchers. People raise their children so differently, from the parents who helicopter, to the parents who sit on the side and just look at their phones, there's such a difference. I get a little mad still when other people's kids go *up* the slide instead of down, and my boys know: Slides are for going down.

It's not hard to look at some of these parents and start wondering who matches up with whom. I can't say that I specifically saw a guy play with kids and then head off by himself, but when your kid is four and he can go up stairs, down a slide, and repeat that for an hour straight, without tiring, and I still have to drag him to the car—literally—it gives you time to concoct such scoundrels.

EM: I kind of wanted to kick Eugene's ass, which I assume is part of the point; we have to share that in common with the narrator. But he's a monster uniquely tailored to the narrator's weaknesses and neuroses. . . and I bet it's safe to assume, yours, as its creator?

MC: I think that's the one atrocity that everyone in the world still agrees on—now, after Charlottesville, that Nazi-hating isn't as universal as we'd like—strange adults messing with your kids. There's the up-slide parents and they bother me in a minor way, and then there's the parents who let their kids run with sticks, play pirate, that kind of thing, chase my kids with the sticks—please stop your child from running after my kid with a tree branch, please, or I'll have to. I haven't seen the orphaned parent around, but it doesn't take much to irritate me when my kids are concerned. Luckily, I was older when I had kids, so I'm calmer and I've never actually started a fight at a playground. I just think about them and then write stories.

EM: Eugene is this ideal figure in many ways: He is as energetic and generous with the kids, at least where playing with them is concerned, as most parents wish they could be; he bikes everywhere, so he's probably fit, and he's certainly ecologically responsible. He'd really rub salt in the wound of a lot of fathers. But where it might be satisfying to reveal a darkness in Eugene or have your messy protagonist victor over him somehow, it wouldn't have been as strong a story. How did you feel making him instead lose everything to this strange, annoyingly perfect person?

MC: I think he had to be perfect, as otherwise, he wouldn't have worked. The narrator in this story, had there been a fault, would have latched onto it the instant he saw it, would have been able to forget about this energetic dad, wouldn't have noticed he hadn't brought any kids with him. The obsession starts with the perfection, with the jealousy.

And I think that's what I'm getting at here, our narrator's own inadequacies coming out. Eugene is doing what he's supposed to do and is knocking it out of the park. That's the core of jealousy, success, and certainly, I've felt that, at the playground, at the gym, in my job. No one considers anyone running alongside or behind, just ahead.

EM: What are you working on now, or what has your interest?

MC: Last year I did this massive blog project called Story366 where I read from a different story collection every day and then wrote an essay about one of the stories. It was the greatest thing I'd ever done and it also almost killed me. I didn't write a whole lot last year as a result, so this year, I've been happy just to write stories, to make that my priority. I've been supposed to be working on a novel since around 1998, and that's still on the back burner. I also said that after my last book, which was mostly shorts, as were my other two books, that I'd try to write longer stories, the kind that I admire, the kind that end up in *The New Yorker* and *Best American Short Stories*, because hey, what am I waiting for? But those are hard and they take a long time and if I'm going to write a 25-page story, I might as well write my novel. So I've been happy just to give myself permission to do what I like to do, and that's write shorts, like "Monster" and a few others. It's been a great freedom, writing what I want to write and not what I'm supposed to. I recommend it.

EM: It helps that there's more of a market for flash fiction and essay now; I was reading T.C. Boyle's introduction to the 2015 *Best American* collection recently and he talks about how perhaps social media, the internet, etc. is distracting enough to make the short form more widely appealing again, and it seems flash would be even more so. But

as you said, it does not matter whatsoever—no great artist ever became great by doing what they were supposed to do.

MC: Oh, I think we all like to believe that our failures are the genius that no one else has recognized yet. Maybe that'll be my new motto, or at least an early favorite for the tombstone.

[clear-line]

Michael Czyzniejewski's most recent collection of stories is *I Will Love You For the Rest of My Life: Breakup Stories* (Curbside Splendor, 2015). He is an associate professor of English at Missouri State University, where he serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Moon City Review* and Managing and Literary Editor for Moon City Press.