

Web Exclusive Interview: Richard Mirabella



Our November Web Exclusive story ["The Sister"](#) has a magical, fairy-tale feeling but a very real and timeless sense of the heartbreak and bewilderment of loss. We talked with author Richard Mirabella about the story's roots, queer fiction, and the pains and pleasures of writing with a full-time, non-writing job.

Erin McReynolds: "The Sister" is one of the most accurate depictions of loss I've read. You managed to nail how maddening and senseless it is; how the pain casts about looking for validation or acknowledgment, and if it gets none, never resolves. Did you set out to do this or did you start with one element that led you here?

Richard Mirabella: Thank you! I love how you put that: "the pain casts about looking for validation . . ."

I didn't know what I was writing when I started the story, honestly. I wrote it very quickly, which is not like me at all. It was only after I had some time away from it that I started to see what it was about, and went back in with some clarity.

The starting point was the fairy tale "Brother and Sister," which I love. It's terrifying! In the story, the brother is turned into a fawn by their evil stepmother (of course) and the sister cares for him. Then she marries a king, and the brother/fawn fades into the background while the sister's story goes on. I didn't want to retell it, exactly. Caroline finds her life because of Philip's disappearance, but you're right when you say the loss is never resolved.

EM: The first sentence starts out like a fairy tale and sets this expectation, like it's saying what you're about to read is all realer than something realistic could be. And it maintains a magical quality throughout: Caroline and her 12 brothers in a house at the edge of the woods; the one-eyed youngest and his disappearance, which only Caroline seems to be living with. What made you approach this story like a fairy tale?

RM: I love fairy tales. Everything in a fairy tale feels meaningful. You can explore real-life troubles and horrors, but you're free to bend reality, delve into magic. I've tried and failed to write them in the past.

Fairy tale language is so direct, and brutality is expressed in a dispassionate style. "The boy went into the woods to hide. When the woodsman found him, he swung his ax and off came the boy's head." I wanted Philip's disappearance to be mysterious. You can get away with something like that in a fairy tale. It's nightmarish that Caroline is the only one experiencing it, as if she's been cursed. Maybe the curse is breaking at the end.

EM: Can you talk a little about your novel *Justin*?

RM: I get so nervous talking about my novel! It's still very much a work-in-progress. I want to write about queer lives, and *Justin* is definitely a queer book. It's partly about a man's relationship with his mother and sister, and a trauma suffered in his teen years at the hands of a violent, young sociopath, his first lover. The book spans his entire life, but it's a short novel. I love short novels!

I think trauma is often a part of queer life, unfortunately, but it was important to me that love and friendship between queer folks be represented in the novel in some way, too.

EM: Who are some writers that you think write queer coming-of-age particularly well?

RM: Asking me about books is dangerous! I'll try to control myself. One of my favorite gay novels is *Nebraska* by George Whitmore. What a gut-punch of a book! Whitmore died of AIDS when he was 44. I wish he'd written fifty books. I tell everyone about this book, and I buy it for friends when I find it.

Kaitlyn Greenidge's *We Love You, Charlie Freeman* is a brilliant novel about racism, familial love, and dysfunction, and sisterhood. But it's also a queer coming-of-age story, with incredible writing about teens and emerging sexuality. Patrick Ryan's short story "The Dream Life of Astronauts" does that really well, too.

EM: Your bio says you're a civil servant in Albany. I'm a little obsessed with what other professions writers are holding in order to support their work, and what some of the challenges are that are unique to that job. Can you dish a bit?

RM: I work at the University at Albany, but I'm not an instructor. I'm an office worker plain and simple. My day ends at 4:30 PM and I know a chunk of the evening will be devoted to reading and writing (if I'm not seduced by good TV).

The downside is that when I get home, I often don't *want* to write, because I've been in front of a computer all day. So, about five years ago, I started scheduling it, and wrote almost every day. I don't think that's a requirement, but being on a schedule helps me. In dark moments, I wonder how much farther along in my writing life I would be, how much faster I could have finished my novel, if I didn't have to work full time. But, I remind myself I managed to write my

novel an hour at a time, most nights after work.

EM: Man, I wish TV weren't so good right now! I've always had a full-time job, and I used to envy people who went right from MFA to regularly publishing and teaching. But it's also critical, in order to write about a world people recognize themselves in, to *live* in a world that people recognize themselves in, right?

RM: Right! Helpful to this of it that way. It's so easy not to feel like a "real writer" when you're just getting up every day and going to a job that has nothing to do with writing. I've definitely been envious of the literary lives of other writers, but there's more than one way to do this, isn't there? What connects all writers is that we're looking for space, quiet, and time to do our work. Quiet is a commodity.

[clear-line]

Richard Mirabella is a writer and civil servant living in Albany, NY. His short fiction has appeared in *One Teen Story* (Jan 2016 issue), *Passages North*, and *New World Writing*. Currently, he is working on his first novel, *Justin*. He tweets @RPMirabella.

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