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# The Whole Damn Train: An Interview with Adam Johnson

By: Ben Greenlee

Based on the types of stories spun from the fingers of Adam Johnson one could easily imagine his office decorated in Clovis points, several photographs of the Canadian flag planted on the moon, wolves sleeping at his feet, and a Kruger Mark VI sniper rifle fitted with Raytheon scope leaning in the corner. Turns out that this morning he's navigating the complexities of a new phone, just like everyone occasionally does. That's where the power of his stories lie. They speak to the reader on what it means to be human amongst other humans regardless of where they're speaking from, drawing on the familiar situations and emotions we all possess. "We're in this together" his stories demand of us. It's not how they communicate, it's what they communicate.

Author of the acclaimed story collection *Emporium*, and two novels, *Parasites Like Us* and *The Orphan Master's*

*Son*—published this past January—Adam Johnson is a writer showing us our own world through the skewed lens of others in a very maximal style, attempting to catch every detail imaginable to make it real. His voice exudes passion and thoughtfulness, not only through his stories—which he still considers fondly even 10 years later—but also in real life. I find myself in the privileged position of speaking with him on the arguably absurd setting of his stories and why he chooses them.

"People do call my stories absurd," he tells me as he sits in Palo Alto California where he serves as a creative writing professor at Stanford University, "but that's somewhat limiting. I think the real absurdities are parents getting a divorce, or someone dying, or a kid not being able to connect with someone. Real life is absurd and I'm trying to work through that."

In a present where there are bomb-disposing robots and actual teenage snipers and satellites controlled by unknown persons behind a desk, his stories don't miss the mark of reality all that much. Life isn't fiction, he suggests, but it sometimes looks that way. So he gives readers these shifted worlds for a reason, worlds often likened to fiction luminaries Kurt Vonnegut, TC Boyle, and Jim Shepard.

"I've always enjoyed stories that take me someplace new. Show me another life I may not have considered in a fully realized world I may not have considered. I want to do the same for my readers. Let them recognize their lives and these wholesale worlds but in a transported way. The familiar through the unfamiliar." This couldn't be truer than in *The Orphan Master's Son*, Johnson's second novel that takes readers to a very real yet unfamiliar place: North Korea.

The novel follows Pak Jun Do, a North Korean everyman who is desperately trying to find love and connection in a society that ultimately punishes it. Beginning his life as the Orphan Master's son, Jun Do moves through this terrified society by being the best of what officially doesn't exist, questioning the regime by undermining their secret activities and working for something more than just being another patriotic martyr. He is a midnight kidnapper that lets his victims live in his memory; a radioman stashed in the hull of a fishing boat where he tries to connect with the ephemeral voices he hears; an invisible hero sent to prison who lives long enough to be its only known escapee; and an impersonator of the nation's second most recognized man where he can now act on his plans of finding real love, the sort of love that makes one fall forever.

All of these events lead him to Sun Moon, the nation's top actress, "so pure she didn't know what starving people looked like", and the Dear Leader

himself, Kim Jong Il. The novel culminates in a thrilling display of courage as Jun Do challenges Kim Jong Il by ruining the Dear Leader's plans to stick it to a visiting American delegation during a prisoner exchange. Through his actions Jun Do provides Sun Moon the opportunity to live a new life and shows North Korea that their government is not untouchable, finally allowing himself and other characters to reach a place where love and compassion are a possibility.

True to his own dedication of creating a new reality for his readers, Johnson spent years researching this enigmatic country and even visited the DPRK, very uncommon access for any American, much less a writer wanting to explore the inner workings of this militaristic and antagonistic regime. Of course recreating this repressive country could not be easy, especially if he was going to populate it with real people.

"I like to write about events, characters, and issues that aren't always mine," he says, "at least initially. But of course I'm in there somewhere." The question of authenticity is then asked when a writer explores the voices that don't always match up specifically with their own. He tells me his first novel—*Parasites Like Us*—was incredibly personal, and one could even argue that *Emporium* used a similar voice in each of its stories that could be Johnson's. Ultimately how can an author use a voice that isn't theirs and still be considered authentic? Adam Johnson ran into this problem during his trip to the last great dictatorship on the planet.

"While I could get all the information and facts and history I wanted, I wasn't able to actually talk to anyone. To hear their story. I had these translators that acted as guides which really acted as blockers for any real communication."

So what is the responsibility a writer has to their research, in what ways can or should they use it?

"Don't take information for granted," he answers. "I knew the voice of the propaganda speakers and what a monument looked like, but I couldn't know what these things meant to the people shaped by them. Though the

information is there, all my imagination went into the characters. I had a responsibility to these people. My research shaped that responsibility."

He tells me that his responsibility is also to the reader. One aspect he always considers when writing is just how believable the story is, working on them until he or anyone else can accept what is being expressed. Would a high ranking government official really poison his whole family with a can of tainted peaches to save them from the regime he helps perpetuate? Would an old couple hide behind faked blindness to escape the scrutiny of their interrogator son? Can actual love be found in a country that has never expressed it? The answers to these questions lie in the believability factor Johnson labors over which often comes through improvisation.

"It's almost always a matter of faith," he says. "I work on these stories until one aspect of it shines through and shapes what I want to say. Of course I need to have faith that I can actually find that aspect, or that the story works its way towards it. Without faith, I don't have much."

In *The Orphan Master's Son*, that moment comes through when Pak Jun Do along with North Korean delegates visit a Texas senator on his ranch midway through the novel, effectively bringing this cultural scrutiny stateside. "North Korea is constantly critiquing the US. Always watching what we're doing. I had to adopt that stance and see what I could see."

What readers get is an opportunity to witness the exchange between Americans viewing themselves and how everyone else views us, suggesting that while the novel may place North Korea under the microscope, the United States is not exempt from that same inspection. Jun Do notices that the land is sectioned with bones instead of barbwire, "as if something had died to build every five meters of that fence", and the Texans throw back their fish once they catch them, fishing an entertainment instead of a means of survival. Here Johnson is at his best. He

turns the reader's growing sympathy inward and asks them to address what they believe their nation is like as opposed to the North Korea of blatant lies and life as commodity.

"Once I found this realization the story took shape, and I could finally believe it. This wasn't a novel about a country or multiple countries or one character. It was a story of human connection and what we get through that connection." The aspects of writing and crafting stories I pulled from this conversation with Adam Johnson were dedication and labor. In order to have something to say, to make those connections, writers need to believe in what they write, and they need to compose them with time and work, even if they aren't always realized.

"I have stories no one will ever see besides me," he says. "But they always lead to somewhere else. Usually somewhere better. I just didn't give up."

He left me with a story which I think encompasses his approach to writing and what he specifically does for readers, giving them the full range of humanity and the details of the world other contemporary writers neglect to do. "I was in South Dakota one time...driving across the middle of the state, and I remember looking out in the distance and seeing a train. And I remember I saw the front of it and the back of it and every single damn car of it, even though it was probably seven miles long. And I realized that this was the only place in the world where you could see the whole of something big like that."

I would partially disagree. His work and stories act as a place where readers can see the whole of something they may have never considered, the range of familiar human emotions in perhaps unfamiliar worlds. He includes the details of everyday and the people we meet, populating these fictionalized places with the realities we often overlook. The commonplaces of our lives are absurd, his stories suggest, so how do we accommodate that? Adam Johnson dedicates himself to the human being and the human need of connection, of relating with anything other than ourselves. And because of this, we can see the whole of who we really are.