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Interview with Geoff Herbach

By: Abbey Numedahl

What drives the development of your novels? Do you usually begin with a plot idea, or do you start with a character?

Herbach: Well. Oh no, Abbey. I don't know. Okay. I guess I've recently changed courses. I've always had voices that became characters that became stories. The book I'm working on now has been plotted for a year, but I've tried several different characters to do what I want done. It has taken writing the first 50-100 pages a bunch of times to finally land on the right character. I think I prefer the other way. But here I am.

Both *The Miracle Letters of T. Rimberg* and the Felton novels are told through a journal-entry style of narration. How did you arrive at this form of story-telling?

Herbach: Yeah, there are similarities, but they rose differently. The Miracle Letters came out of performance. I'd get on the stage at some bar and deliver a fictional suicide letter. I wrote hundreds of them. Eventually a larger story began coming together. That thing was fractured and epistolary from the start. Two of the three Felton books are more direct address. Felton is mumbling in your ear. The middle one, *Nothing Special*, is a long letter. That's the "mind" book of the three (body, mind, soul – the "soul" is called I'm With Stupid...that's the tone). In *Nothing Special* I wanted Felton to have a medium between his brain and the reader, something

that would give him pause, a reason to think before rambling. I really do like letters/emails/journals for angry protagonists, especially. I find them really funny, fun to write.

You manage this style very successfully (or at least this writer thinks so), so, Bravo! But is it ever difficult for you to use this extended, intimate way of telling a character's story while still avoiding making the "meaning" of the story, or the character's self-discovery, obvious? Any personal tips or tricks of the trade for writing emotionally close first person?

Herbach: It's a danger, for sure. But I actually think good writers are more in danger of saying nothing for fear of the subtlety police. If you're going to write all confessional, here's what might help. Look in the mirror. Weep a little.

Say: I will own this choice. I don't care if my characters tell a lot. They'll do so in an entertaining way (and will annoy only those people who are often annoyed). Sometimes, maybe, they'll figure something out (as people do).

They'll gain an insight and they'll communicate it pretty well. Sometimes they'll be totally off base and the meaning will be found in how badly they miss. That's good. Let them tell. And, do not obfuscate out of fear or for the purposes of posturing.

I'm really a fan of self-aware first person narrators. That said, I'd like to write some other stuff, too.

The central focus of your career at the moment seems to be your young adult novels (*Stupid Fast*, *Nothing Special* and the forthcoming *I'm With Stupid*), but you have worked in a number of different genres, including literary fiction novels for adults, an indie rock musical, and screenplays. Does the genre you want to write in dictate your stories, or does the story you want to write choose its genre?

Herbach: When I began writing *Stupid Fast* I didn't really know I was writing YA. I found out pretty quickly. The story dictated the genre, I think. Now I'm under contract to write another couple

of YA books (so, I'll have written five total) and the genre is driving. I guess maybe that's why plot came before character in the answer way above.

On that same token, did you always consider yourself a novelist? Or did shorter forms come first?

Herbach: Before I turned 30, I would not have thought a novel possible. I had to write a Masters thesis in urban planning, which ran over a hundred pages, before I understood I had the word count available within me to make a novel. When I printed my urban planning paper, I walked around with it in my hand all afternoon. I loved its girth. Since 30, I've considered myself a novelist first. Not that they have all succeeded (not remotely), but I'm happiest in that place, pulling characters through a big ass pile of paper. I do love script form – screenplay and stage stuff. It's pretty rare that I'll write a short story except under duress (it happens). I'm not a very good short story writer so far.

What advice would you, as seasoned, published novelist Geoff, give to young aspiring writer, Geoff?

Herbach: Be nerdy and in love with doing the work, so that your passion for making stuff stays your reason for writing. As soon as writing becomes about publishing and advances and contracts, fun begins to leak out and jealousies grow and unhealthy eccentricities manifest, all of which kill joy and really, other than taking solace in the work, there's no good reason for being a writer.

Who are your favorite writers at the moment?

Herbach: I love George Saunders probably too much. I also have an unhealthy affiliation with Jennifer Egan. They are writers who make me want to hang glide, I love them so much. It's not right.

Inquiring fans want to know: can you tell us a little about your upcoming projects?

Herbach: I'm finishing a novel about a kid who robs soda machines to redistribute wealth to the overweight, because he feels he's a victim of advertising (something like that). Also, I'm trying to get a bunch of music and art together for an e-book, based on the musical I co-wrote, about a twee brother and sister rock outfit who is being sued by their Midwestern community, because they want to move to Brooklyn. Those are the biggies at the moment.