

Meta Waters & Real Waters : An Interview with Nate Pritts

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Nate Pritts is the author of five books of poetry, most recently Sweet Nothing. His poetry & prose have been published widely, both online and in print and on barns, at places like Forklift, Ohio, Court Green, Untoward, and PopMatters, as well as Rain Taxi and Boston Review where he frequently contributes reviews. He is the founder and principal editor of H_NGM_N, an online journal and small press.

His story "The Translation" appears in Issue Thirty-Two of The Collagist.

Here, Nate Pritts speaks with interviewer Melissa Goodrich about enthusiasm, endings, and his poems painted on barns.

1. Right away we're struck with meta, at the end of your opening paragraph: "Insert here a few sentences, straightforward in style, about his life that allows transition to—but downplays—the moment of crisis." The narrator coaches, "Elicit resounding waves of emotion." What is your relation to meta? Do you ever find it obnoxious? Do you tread meta waters carefully?

I tread everything carefully – meta waters & real waters, the path under my feet & even the clouds in the sky, the real things in my real life, as well as the things made out of letters on pages that I type.

Which I suppose is my way of saying that everything (meta included) gets worn out, gets

used up, becomes a meme. I don't find meta any more annoying than I find narrative annoying, or lyric, or language, or the air that I breathe. These are all things that exist – my annoyance, or my labeling them as obnoxious, doesn't change that. People fall into styles, or boxes, all the time. To me, the most interesting part of any trap is trying to figure out how to escape.

2. What is the best metafiction you have ever encountered? (My money's on Eggers' *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*)

I've never read that. I've never encountered it. Does that mean I win? My favorite novel is *The Good Soldier* by Ford Maddox Ford, a book that is mostly about how to tell a story (the saddest story). When I wrote "The Translation," I had been reading some novels by Philippe Sollers (friend of Lacan & Barthes). His novels (originally in French – hence my narrator's/my desire to learn the language) are written in an incredibly abstracted stream of *self-*

consciousness. It's amazing that they proceed from page to page at all since they're so cripplingly self-aware. There is not much action in the traditional sense, & everything (characters & setting) are transmitted in a fairly vague manner, an almost impenetrable subjectivity.

3. You write, “At times, he feels as if his own language has failed him... Or rather, [...] the enthusiasm has dulled.” Do you find yourself feeling this way, ever, as a writer, as a poet/prosette? How do they inform one another, and do you find yourself genre-leaping when ‘the enthusiasm’ for one ‘dulls’?

I don't often genre leap. But the situation you describe is the current state of my dis/union. The answer to your question about enthusiasm, then, is both YES & NO.

My poetry has often been constructed out of a series of moments, very intentionally MADE. Lately, my poetry has come to me through a process of uncovering – clearing away the noise

to discover what's really present, stripping experiences down to recover the initial impulses, whatever threads are resident already (rather than building some new house). So one way to think of it (the way I think of it) is that my process has gone from generating intentional utterances to now attempting to step back, trying to approach a more gestural utterance. But I'm a writer. And so I found I still had all this intentional energy, this drive to create something – to be ACTIVE instead of just ATTUNED. I needed something to do where I could still write in terms of building, in terms of directing something to happen.

My enthusiasm for poetry is all I know. It hasn't dulled. But it has started engaging with my intellect & my soul in different ways, & this led to new paths, new options. New challenges.

4. You've had work published on barns? What words? Could they be read from the road?

I've never driven by to see them, though I would like to soon. The painter Bill Dunlap is at work on an ever-growing series of public art reclamations. He paints barns & sometimes he includes snippets of poems. [You can read more about the project that involved my poem "Spring Psalter" \(from my third book of poems, *The Wonderful Yeare*\) here](#), along with some images of Bill's terrific work.

5. What are endings meant to do? And yours in particular: do you seek a lilt uplifting, a reckoning, a glad-sad? "He seeks a new project undeterred by the mess he's made which is really all the mess there is."

Endings are a trick. We all know that, because we're people – people alive & seeking every day for some shape to our narrative, some arc to our struggle. And it's not really there: no resolution. Thank God.

Endings in writing, then, have a chance to be the only kinds of endings we know. They should

reveal / revisit the tensions that have arisen throughout the course of the work (the poem, the story, the whatever). I like my endings to FEEL final, even if they aren't – which, for me, means that they sometimes come across as abrupt, or seem to veer from the direction they appeared to be going.

Maybe most of all, an ending should remind you that there are beginnings.

In “The Translation,” the arc I was interested in had to do with this character losing himself on purpose. It seems to me now that I wanted a reader to question whether or not this was viable – to lose oneself, to forget oneself, to live both inside your own head as well as somehow separate from it.

6. What's next in your writing life?

As a result of what I said earlier (Q#3), I'm working mostly on fiction right now. By which I mean I am dividing my time between writing & staring out the window trying to think through how everything might fall into place. I started a

new piece this morning (after a few days of staring out the window) but I think it's going to be easier for me if I storyboard the whole thing first, so I'm sharpening my pencils.

7. And reading life?

I have three or four books going at any one time, & I cycle through them pretty quickly – finishing one & then picking up something new in one motion. Though I sometimes get on kicks (of theme or topic or author that I stick with & explore) mostly my reading is loose & varied. The stack next to me looks like this: poetry (Mary Wroth & Shelley & Matt Hart), fiction (Carson McCullers, Sarah Orne Jewett, & a friend just recommended another French novelist, Michel Houellebecq), non-fiction (*Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records*, which reminds me that furious energy can be maintained, & *Many Subtle Channels*, which is a little too pleased with itself) & comic books (a collection of METAL MEN issues as well as a

new Jack Kirby KAMANDI collection that I'll be writing about for Rain Taxi).