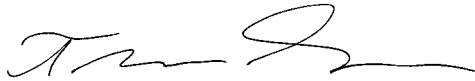


INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW PORTER



by Trevor Gore



*Andrew Porter is the author of the short-story collection, *The Theory of Light and Matter*, which won the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award in Short Fiction and was recently republished in paperback by Vintage/Knopf. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he is the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards, including the 2004 W.K. Rose Fellowship in the Creative Arts from Vassar College, a James Michener–Paul Engle Fellowship from the James Michener/Copernicus Foundation, and a Pushcart Prize. Currently, he lives in San Antonio, where he is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Trinity University.*



Photo credit: Chris Krajaer

Andrew Porter

Interview by Trevor Gore

All of the stories in your short-story collection, The Theory of Light and Matter, are written in first person. What advantages do you feel first person affords you?

Well, for one, I like the intimacy of it and the idea of assuming a persona. It's easier for me to engage with a story and fall into the dream of it when I actually become the character. One of the really addictive things about writing is that when you're truly focused and writing well, you're completely removed from the world, and when you assume a persona, you don't really have to think about what you're saying. You can let the character speak and as long as your sense of that character is strong and you're true to the voice, then you don't have to worry about what it means. You can figure that out later or let someone else figure it out. The process becomes much more intuitive and exciting at that point. It's really just a matter of forgetting the problems in your own life and embracing the character's problems. They need to become your problems, and you need to care about them deeply. If you can't get yourself into that mindset, then it's probably not a good time for you to be writing.

One of the unique aspects of a first-person story is that the narrator has so many limits placed upon his or her knowledge. How do you as a writer use these limits to your advantage?

Marilynne Robinson once said that the majority of fiction is about a character coming to some understanding about his or her false relationship to the truth, and that's something I think about a lot when I'm working on a story. I'm always thinking, what *doesn't* the character know? Often, the tension that drives a story comes from the fact that the character is being kept in the dark about something, or is perhaps in denial. That's a very powerful engine.

The other advantage is that limitations on knowledge allow for certain dramatic turns and possibilities that might not have occurred to me earlier in the writing process. For example, when I was working on my short story "Azul," I never considered the potentially violent nature of Azul's boyfriend or how he might feel about their break-up. The narrator didn't have access to this information, so it wasn't something I thought about. But later in the writing process,

when I found myself stuck, I thought about what types of things the narrator didn't know, and the lack of knowledge surrounding the boyfriend's nature occurred to me. That small ignorance on the part of the narrator opened a lot of doors for me. So, I guess what I'm saying is that behind all of those unanswered questions in a first person story, behind all of those things that the narrator doesn't know, are potential conflicts and plot-lines, potential avenues that the story might take. These limits on knowledge help me with all of my stories. I like the fact that the narrator doesn't always know what's going on emotionally or psychologically with the other characters. This allows characters to say and do things that the narrator, and even the reader, might not be expecting. It opens a doorway to a multitude of ways to heighten the tension.

Of course, sometimes your best advantage comes from keeping everyone in the dark. In my story "Coyotes," you have a situation where the narrator's father goes on extended trips. I deliberately kept it ambiguous as to what the father is doing, because the narrator's longing for him comes across even stronger as a result of this ambiguity. Had I given the narrator this knowledge, it would have prevented the story from accessing that deepest sense of longing that we all can relate to, that feeling that transcends the story itself.

You work with a lot of adult narrators who look back on their childhood and question aspects of their experiences. How do you keep these narrators in the dark so they can ask genuine questions while still allowing the readers to see the truth?

It's a tricky thing to manage, but it relates to the fact that when you're writing in the first person point of view, you're always telling two stories at once. One of those stories is being told through the somewhat biased lens of the narrator and one of those stories is being told through the slightly more objective lens of the writer. If you consider my story, "Hole," for example, you have a narrator who is looking back on his childhood and the accidental death of his friend, a death that he feels responsible for, even though he was too young to know how to prevent the accident. As a reader, you can

understand the causal relationship between the events in the story and you understand that this was a freak accident, because you weren't present; you don't share the bias of responsibility and guilt. But, the narrator is biased in his view, so at the end of the story, his guilt still blinds him and leaves him confused about what actually happened that day, whereas the reader can see the truth.

Which first-person narrators taught you the most?

Well, that's a very long list. I love the narrator in Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*. He's an inveterate gambler, who narrates in a very whimsical, almost manic way, and practically everything that comes out of his mouth has to be taken with a grain of salt. Yet, he's incredibly sympathetic and likeable. He's also wildly entertaining. As a reader, you get drawn into his way of thinking, his rationalizations and his logic, even though you know on some level that what he's doing is nuts. I feel a similar affinity toward a lot of John Cheever's narrators for the same reason. There's so much confidence in the voice itself that you almost forget that what the narrator is doing—like sneaking into his neighbors' house and stealing from them—is not a perfectly rational and logical behavior given the circumstances.

I think a lot of these narrators taught me early on that it's all about voice. If the voice is strong enough, you can convince a reader of just about anything and get them to sympathize with just about any narrator, regardless of what he or she might have done. This is one of the reasons that I always teach Richard Ford's "Rock Springs" during the first week of my fiction writing class. I want to show the students how Ford gets us to sympathize with a guy who is basically a car thief, running from the law. He isn't a person you'd want to invite into your house, and yet, who isn't moved by that beautiful and heartbreaking last paragraph of that story? Who doesn't care deeply about this narrator by the end?

Charles Baxter once said that he is extremely hesitant to trust epiphanies that happen in short stories. He sees them as, generally, being nothing more than ephemeral realizations that will rarely impact the character for more than a few days. Do you believe the changes found in a short story tend to stick with the characters?

I've always thought that Baxter made an interesting argument in his essay, "Against Epiphanies" about both the overabundance of epiphanies in contemporary fiction and also about the inherent "falseness" of many of them. I would have to agree with him on both of those points, although I also think that epiphanic endings can be incredibly effective and moving if handled skillfully, a point that Baxter himself makes. The key is to let everything grow out of the story. If you're true to yourself, and true to the character, and true to the story, then it's unlikely that you'll fall into the trap of false epiphanies. The problem comes when you've lost sight of the story and you start to think too much about what *you* want to happen in the story, rather than letting the story evolve organically.

For me, personally, I'm more interested in what the characters are feeling at the end. If you consider Raymond Carver's "Cathedral," for example, there's an implied epiphany at the end of that story, yet I don't think most readers truly believe that the narrator has been forever changed by this experience, that he'll wake up the next day with a new attitude about life. The story is more about a moment, and more specifically about a feeling that the narrator has at that moment—a feeling that even he can't fully articulate. That's the type of epiphanic ending that interests me, one that's more about a feeling than a conscious realization.

Tell me more about epiphanies of feeling. How can a transient feeling act as a profound insight?

Well, not every character has the same ability to articulate their insights. Some characters simply don't possess that level of self-awareness. What they can express, however, is a feeling—which is what the narrator in "Cathedral" does. I think that's one of the reasons that Carver's stories were so revolutionary. He was dealing with a group of characters who didn't always have the ability to analyze their experiences, and so he relied on feeling or sometimes very vague statements that implied feeling: statements like the one at the end of "Cathedral," "It was really something." To me, there's an implied realization at the end of that story, but what the "it" refers to is still ambiguous, which is one of the reasons I like it so much. It satisfies the reader on some

level, an emotional level, and yet it also leaves the exact nature of the character's epiphany up for debate.

Obviously, there are any number of ways that a story might end, and what you're looking for, as a writer, is the one that feels right to you. Sometimes the ending is very obvious, but often times it isn't, and when it isn't, it can take a very long time before you find the exact sentence, or the exact emotional note, you want to end on. So, my advice would be to not think too much about technique when it comes to ending a story, but to focus instead on the story itself and the characters. Meditate on the text. Usually, there's something inevitable about a good ending, but the only way you're going to find that ending is by thinking about what you've written so far.

Your story "Skin" has a very interesting ending. The narration is in first-person present as the narrator describes a special moment in his life when he's cuddling with his girlfriend on a summer day, but at the end of the story it jumps into a future tense narration as he tells about six or seven months later when they must sign away the child that results. Why did you choose to change tenses for the ending?

"Skin" is about a very specific moment in the narrator's life, a moment of innocence. And yet, in order to add weight to that moment, I needed to show what happened later, what changed in his relationship with his girlfriend. I chose to use the present tense to describe that moment of innocence, even though it's taking place in the past, because, had I used the past tense, it would have simply felt like one continuous memory. The present tense creates a sense of immediacy and I wanted to convey to the reader that this moment is always very present in the narrator's mind.

When I was in grad school, I remember noticing that a lot of the writers I was reading at the time would use this technique of flashing forward to the future right before the end of the story and letting the reader know what was going to happen to the characters later, then they would return to the present moment. I found this to be a very effective and emotionally powerful technique, especially when the events of the future weren't so wonderful. This type of technique allows writers to end on a somewhat optimistic note, or even in a

moment of great happiness, because whatever optimism or happiness the ending might suggest is undercut by the reader's knowledge of what will happen later. In "Skin," I ended in a moment of great tenderness and love, and yet the overall tone of the ending is somewhat tragic because the reader knows what lies ahead for these characters.

Your answer seems to imply that stories today cannot successfully end on an unequivocal happy note. Could you talk a little about what makes the sense of impending tragedy a better ending than a sense of impending happy resolution?

My students often ask a similar question. Most of them haven't read a lot of short fiction coming into the class, and usually about halfway through the semester someone will ask, "Are any of these short stories ever going to have a happy ending?" I don't always know what to say to this, so I turn the question around, asking them how they'd feel about a certain story if it ended differently, if all of the conflicts were neatly resolved and everyone ended up happy at the end. They'll think about this for a while, and then one of them will say, well yes, it would probably be worse. When I ask why, they'll say, "Because then it wouldn't seem real."

I think that when we're talking about literary fiction, most short stories writers aren't thinking about "happy" or "sad" when they come to the ends of their stories. They're thinking about what seems real, what seems true. But then again, a lot of the short stories that my students see as depressing are not necessarily depressing to me. As long as there's hope for a character at the end of a story, as long as there's some possibility of change, then I rarely find the story depressing. My old teacher, Marilynne Robinson, used to talk a lot about the importance of allowing your characters to have "the open destiny of life," especially at the ends of stories. In other words, even if a character is worse off at the end of the story than at the beginning, as long as their destiny is open, then there's still some sense of hope. The only stories that really depress me are stories where the character's fate is suddenly sealed at the end. If the character is locked up in a jail cell, or sent to an insane asylum, or decides to kill himself. This type of ending limits the character's destiny so profoundly that all you can

do is shake your head and say, “Boy, that’s sad.” The character, in this case, becomes defined by his or her fate, and a lot of the potential complexity in the story is lost.

That being said, we should also clarify the word “story” a bit more, since a lot of novels end on a much more optimistic and hopeful note than a lot of short stories. I think this is because novels tend to cover a much longer period of time and require a much greater investment on the part of the reader. Since the writer is given more time, there’s naturally a greater expectation that certain things can be worked out. In a short story, by contrast, we’re only given a brief glimpse into a character’s life, and usually we’re only learning about a very short period of time, so readers aren’t as likely to trust an ending that resolves a lot of things.

Switching gears, in a previous interview, you mentioned that the best piece of writing advice you ever got was the idea of the strong first draft, where you get the majority of the story down over the course of just a few days. Would you explain how one goes about doing that?

Well, the simple answer to that question is discipline. When a short story first comes to you, it’s very easy to become distracted from it: to pick up the phone and accept an invitation to lunch, or check your email, or decide that it’s really about time you mowed the lawn. It’s very hard to force yourself to sit down at your desk and see the story through from beginning to end, but I’ve often felt that certain stories have a very temporal quality to them and if you don’t force yourself to sit down and write them when they first come to you, if you tell yourself that you’ll get back to them next week, then they sometimes vanish. Over the years, I’ve lost enthusiasm for a lot of stories simply because I allowed too much time to pass between the moment I started writing the story and the moment I returned to it. It’s a horrible feeling to look at a story you once felt excited about and suddenly realize that you’ve forgotten what it was about the story that initially excited you. You try to get yourself back into that state of mind you were in when you first started writing it, but sometimes it’s simply too late.

As for the preparation side of doing a strong first draft, I don’t

prepare a lot before I write my stories. My only goal for a first draft is to get everything down on paper, so they're usually pretty long and unwieldy. The first draft of my short story, "Merkin," was about seventy pages long on my computer, but the final is about twenty-five. I knew that a lot of the scenes I was writing would end up getting cut, but I also knew that I needed to write them in order to fully understand the characters. Sometimes I'll write about a certain aspect of a character's life, even though I know that it won't factor into the story in a prominent way. I might write a few pages about a character's job, then only mention it briefly in the story. It's a way of getting to know the characters. Also, I don't write my first drafts in a linear way, so it's hard for me to plan out plot and structure early on. I'm constantly approaching the story from different angles. I guess my theory is that if you write enough pages about a certain group of characters, there's bound to be a story there somewhere, and that's what the second draft is about, finding the story, then giving it a shape and a structure.

Of course, there's always a lot to discover in any new story, and I usually write until I come to a point where I feel like I've exhausted my initial curiosity about the characters. That's when I stop generating new content and begin revising. In my second draft of the story, I start cutting. In the example of "Merkin," I cut about fifty percent of the content in the second draft and kept chiseling away at it from there, condensing and tightening it until I felt that it was done.

I would imagine that, writing so much about these characters, you find a lot of conflicts. At what point do you know which you'll pursue?

Once I find the right opening paragraph or scene, I usually know what follows. The opening is like the foundation of a house. It tells you what type of house you're going to build, what it will look like, and what other types of things might fit in.

You mentioned what you try to do in a first draft. What do you prohibit yourself from doing?

I tell myself not to think too much. For me, writing is a very intuitive process, and if you start thinking too much about what the story is about or what you want to happen in the story too early in the

process, then you limit what the story can be. I like to be surprised when I'm writing a story, just as readers like to be surprised when they're reading a story, and I firmly believe that if there's no mystery in the story for me, then there certainly won't be for the readers. So I try to leave myself open to almost any type of turn the story might take, even if that turn goes against my initial ideas about the story.

Also, I force myself to keep my first drafts rough. I don't like to start thinking about crafting a specific paragraph or scene until I've figured out the basic structure of the story. You can waste a lot of time working on scenes or paragraphs that you might later have to cut, so I find it's easier to just deal with the big stuff first, then go back in later drafts and focus on the language.

What's your process for starting a story?

Mostly I'm looking for things that interest or puzzle me about a particular group of characters, things I'd like to understand. There has to be some sense of mystery for me there or else there's no point in working on it. The year after I graduated from Iowa, I was on a fellowship and had a lot of free time to experiment with different stories. I'd wake up, start a story, then put it away in a folder and forget about it. The next day I'd wake up and do the same thing. Occasionally, I'd see a whole story through from beginning to end, but for the most part I wrote a lot of partial stories, or beginnings of stories, that I planned to get back to in the future. What I was doing, in retrospect, was simply searching for something that interested me.

Do you still approach story writing in this way?

I was pretty young when I did that, and I was really jumping around a lot. I didn't really know what I was writing about or what I wanted to write about. I was just trying to generate a lot of beginnings in hopes that some of these beginnings might actually lead to stories in the future. Nowadays, I usually focus on two or three stories at the same time. I'll work on a story for a while, revising it, then switch to another one, and then switch again. I never work on something I'm not excited about, so if I get tired of a story I'm working on, or if I get too close to it, I just switch to a different one. At this point, I probably have about six or seven stories at various stages of develop-

ment, most of which I hope to finish in the next two years. I guess that doesn't sound like much of a contrast from when I was doing a new story opening every day, but, believe it or not, I've really settled down. What can I say? Story ideas come to me at random moments, and when they do, I sometimes abandon whatever story I'm working on and turn to the new one. I don't want to lose the passion for the new idea.

What is your order of operations for the revision process? You mentioned that you do a lot of cutting in the second draft, what else happens in the second draft? What do you do in the third, fourth, etc.?

I use the second draft to find the basic structure of the story: where I want to start, how I want things to develop, and then deciding how I want to end. Sometimes, I'll even use Roman numerals to divide the stories into sections, and then paste anything I've written that might relate to a particular section into that section. If something I've written doesn't really fit into any of the sections, then I'll just cut it altogether.

In the third draft, I look at each section individually, and make further decisions about what I want to keep and what I want to throw out. By the time I get to the fourth draft, I dispense with the Roman numerals and just start reading over the story, as a reader might. By that point, the story is usually a reasonable length and often fairly close in structure and content to what the final draft will look like. After that, it's just a matter of crafting the language and compressing what I've written.

You say your first drafts are often not written linearly. What's that look like and at what point does it become more linear?

It's hard to describe what I mean. I don't really think about the overall structure of the story in a conscious way as I'm writing it. I'm aware of certain conflicts, certain thematic elements, etc., and I try to write scenes that I think will address or explore these conflicts and themes, but I try not to think too much about how it's all going to fit together in the end. I might wake up one day and decide that I want to explore the narrator's relationship with a particular character, and so I'll write some back story about that relationship, and then maybe

I'll write a few scenes between the narrator and that character. Then, if I like a particular scene I've written, I'll write a few different versions of that scene for comparison later. All the while, I'm very aware that most of what I'm writing on a particular day won't make its way into the final draft of the story. I realize this might sound a little strange to most people, but after a while, the actual events of the story become apparent to me. I'll write a scene one day, remembering a scene I had written the previous day, and I just know how those two scenes might fit together in the actual story. It sounds a bit haphazard, but by the time I've generated all of the content in my initial draft, I'm already pretty aware of what scenes I want to focus on and what the basic chronology and structure might look like.

As a teacher of undergraduates, do you incorporate the idea of a strong first draft into your classes?

Not directly. I don't like to be prescriptive, and I would never tell my students that one approach to writing a story is better than another. That said, I do think that a lot of young writers feel inhibited or self-conscious when they're writing their first stories, and so I do occasionally encourage them to try to get their first drafts down on paper quickly. This is simply one way of getting them to follow their instincts and to not over-think their stories as they're writing them. I also do a lot of in-class writing exercises for the same reason. It's important for the students to become comfortable engaging with the storytelling part of their mind and not thinking too much about the end result. What's interesting is that the work they produce in those impromptu exercises is sometimes more interesting and surprising than the work they produce in their take-home exercises.

What impact has teaching basic story techniques to undergraduate writers had upon your fiction?

I remember recently talking to my students about the importance of setting. At the time I was working on a story set in Seattle, a city that I had never really spent a lot of time in, and as I was talking to my students I remember wondering why I had set the story there. At one point I said something about how the setting of a story should never be arbitrary. If you set a story in a specific city, or a specific

geographic location, you should always know why, and as soon as I said this, I realized that there was no logical reason for me to set my story in Seattle. It had been an arbitrary decision on my part, and one that didn't make a lot of sense. The next weekend, I changed the setting to one that I was more familiar with, to Houston, and suddenly the whole story came into focus. That type of thing happens to me all the time. There are many times when a student will ask a question about some aspect of writing, and I'll realize I've never really considered that question before.

Mostly, though, I just enjoy watching the students discover the thrill of writing. It reminds me of how I used to feel at their age—in college writing my first stories. And, perhaps more importantly, it reminds me of what all writers need to be reminded of from time to time, that this thing we do, this thing we've devoted our lives to, is supposed to be fun.



Trevor Gore currently lives in Memphis, Tennessee, but at a moment's notice could decide to drop everything and move to Honduras. His work has been published in journals such as the *Missouri Review* and *The Pinch*.