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'Enlightened thoughtlessness'

Interview with American author Chad Harbach



Foto: Beowulf Sheehan

'From rags to riches', it happened to American author Chad Harbach. Unemployed, with only a manuscript he had been working on for the last ten years, he suddenly became the next big literary promise of 2011. His novel The Art of Fielding, about a baseball shortstop who all of a sudden is unable to throw the ball, was celebrated by both critics and the general public. These were not Harbach's first steps into the literary circuit, however. After graduating from Harvard (where Harbach studied English and American Literature) he and authors Keith Gessen, Benjamin Kunkel and Mark Greif founded n+1, 'a new independent magazine' for literature, culture and politics based in New York. This group of intelligent authors and journalists created a platform to discuss the current affairs of these topics in the United States. We contact Harbach by an unsteady Skype connection. He is obviously busy, but after a couple of minutes the friendly American is able to chat with us about n+1, his slow writing process, Herman Melville and other matters related to his successful novel.

n+1: 'A new independent magazine in the US'

'I suppose number 4 from 2005, "Reconstruction" is my favorite issue of n+1. We made a little bit of a mistake in that issue. It was 250 pages long and it was thick.' When asked about his favorite issue of n+1 we can clearly hear Harbach's passion for the magazine. 'We published so many really extraordinary good things that it almost stepped on each other's toes. The issue contained a sort of symposium about the American literary scene. There were several brilliant pieces in that issue. For example, we published a piece by a writer named Phillip Connors. He wrote a memoir about working at the *Wall Street Journal* around the time of 9/11. It is one of the two or three best essays we have ever published. We should have saved some stuff for other issues, number 4 was just too good.'

We first came to know about n+1 because of the 'hipsterbook' *What Was the Hipster?* but on their website we learned about the 'serious' side of n+1. The magazine, which is published three times a year, was founded out of a feeling of dissatisfaction with the intellectual scene in the United States at the time. At present, the magazine has 3500 subscribers. 'Initially we had a few aims', Harbach enlightens. 'One was simply that we didn't feel that there was a magazine in the US that really let young talented and intellectually committed writers do what they really wanted to be doing. All of us were writers, but we found ourselves writing an awful lot of book reviews for other publications. We felt there were things that we were writing about and that we were interested in for which there wasn't any place in any other existing magazines.'

Next to creating a platform for their own publications there were political motivations to launch n+1. Harbach explains: 'It was 2004, the invasion of Iraq had happened very recently. Of course the American Left had to a large extent supported the invasion, which we thought was a terrible mistake, and yet there weren't many outlets in which you could say so. Plus there wasn't a real sort of new independent magazine in the US. Most small magazines in the US are affiliated with universities or have

some other major institutional ties. We do not, we avoided institutional ties.'

The inspiration for *n+1* was drawn from several magazines. 'There were small magazines in the nineties that we admired, one of them was Thomas Frank's [American author, journalist, and columnist for *Harper's Magazine* and *The Wall Street Journal*, ed.] magazine *The Baffler*, there was another called *Hermeneut*, and *Lingua Franca*. These were the magazines that were really vital to us when we were all at college, but when we were in our late twenties all these magazines were gone. We felt that there wasn't a magazine that provided a place for intellectual ferment and so we wondered if we could do that ourselves.'

'We' refers to the group of authors Harbach founded *n+1* with. They all went to college together and although they didn't really know each other at the time, nowadays they form a successful group of young American writers, whose novels are generally well-received. Harbach was the last of them to publish a book. 'Me and other co-founder Keith Gessen had been close friends at college and had long talked about starting a magazine. Two of the other founders, Ben Kunkel and Mark Greif, had actually been at the same school with us. Ben and I were in the same class, but Keith and I hadn't really known Ben at that time. It wasn't until five or six years later we all met. It turned out we all had an enormous respect for each other's work. That was kind of the rare thing about *n+1*, from the very outset we felt each of the other four editors was really just a great writer and was going to do some important things. And it turned out we were right! Part of the excitement of starting the magazine was about publishing each other, we all just felt very confident and enthusiastic about each other's work.'

A 'slow, very slow' writing process

Harbach started writing the novel *The Art of Fielding* in 2000. In 2011, it was finally finished and published shortly afterwards. Harbach fills us in on what happened in the meantime: 'By 2004 we founded *n+1*. The next six years the magazine took more of my time than probably anything, more than my actual job that paid my bills and more than the novel. And of course we didn't get paid for it. Very often the novel was the third thing I was able to get to. So the writing process of *The Art of Fielding*, well, it was slow, very slow. Another reason it took me a long time was that I certainly wrote thousands upon thousands upon thousands of pages, but most of them got thrown away. During the early years of working on the book I probably wrote a hundred words for every one that exists in the book now. I was moving forward very slowly. I did a lot of looping backwards and revising along the way but I didn't actually write the end of the book until at the end of the writing process. Soon after I got to the end and wrote it I started to send the book around. It wasn't that I wrote seven complete drafts of the book, rather that I moved forward little by little and was constantly revising and rethinking along the way.'

Harbach took the time to develop his writing. His main focus was to write a novel of high quality. 'I was very excited about the idea of the book and about these cast of characters. But I also knew that I was very young and an inexperienced writer, and it

was going to be a very complicated and ambitious book. I knew that from the outset it was going to take me a long time to teach myself how to actually write a book. I didn't think it would take me quite as long as it actually did though.'

Eventually the writing and finishing of *The Art of Fielding* accelerated after Harbach lost his job as a copywriter in late 2009. 'The timing was really good because I was very close to getting the book done. It was really just a matter of weeks. I was totally impoverished and couldn't pay my rent, so I was desperate to make something happen with the book. I felt good about the book, I felt good about the overall shape. After it was sold, I spent six months editing it intensely, working twelve to fourteen hours a day. When I got to the end of that process I really felt a sort of completion, which I didn't quite have when I sold it.'

A headline on the internet stated: 'Unemployed Harvard Man auctions baseball novel for \$ 650.000'. Harbach isn't too explicit about the large amount of money he received for his manuscript though. What becomes clear is that he played his cards well. And that finally, his hard work paid off in hard dollars. 'In a certain sense the headline is all true. That was a profile on me that was on the news. All the reporting was true, but then of course they put the silliest headline on it.'

***The Art of Fielding*: a shortstop in crisis**

In *The Art of Fielding* the protagonist Henry Skrimshander is a promising young shortstop. He plays baseball for the liberal arts college Westish nearby Lake Michigan. In his whole career as a baseball player Henry has made zero mistakes. After baseball scouts become interested in him he suddenly is unable to throw the ball. 'The most immediate reason I chose baseball as a sport in the novel is this crisis that Henry is in. This is something that happens in other sports as well, but it has happened to some very prominent professional baseball players. So I witnessed this as a fan, and I just became really obsessed with the idea that this could be a fictional premise. You have this problem which is entirely psychological and interior, which is something that a novel can describe. But on the other hand, an athlete's psychological problem can come out in such a public and dramatic way. So I sort of chose baseball by accident because I wanted to write about that problem. I think this issue comes up in baseball because it is such an isolated game. It is a team sport, but it is sort of unique as a team sport because the players' roles are all so isolated from each other. I think there is a sort of loneliness to the game. It's very interesting. There is real tension there. And it was also fun to write about baseball because I enjoyed to write about the dynamics of the team and at the same time about the kind of loneliness of the private crisis Henry Skrimshander goes through.'

The characters in the novel have unlikely names such as Skrimshander, Starblind, Quisp or Spirodocus. It doesn't come as a surprise to us that Harbach has often been asked to explain them: 'It is funny, I have been asked regularly about the names', he says. 'People take more notice of the names than I might have suspected.' With characters with unlikely names like the above, that doesn't come as a surprise to us. 'I do

think names are really important in fiction and I certainly spent a lot of time thinking about them. But on the other hand, I worked on the book for so long that these characters have had their names for many years. They stopped to sound unusual after a while. I can hardly remember giving them their names. People say: “why did you choose these unusual names” and I say: “what do you mean, they are just people.”

For example, there is Mike Schwartz. A dark name for a dark character? ‘What I certainly thought about were the connotations of the name Mike Schwartz when I was choosing it. He might be a dark character in the novel. He is sort of a master of a lot of dark arts, although his purposes are rarely sinister.’ At the end of the novel his relationship with Henry is explained by psychiatrist Dr. Rachels. She says that Mike functions as an oppressive, tyrannical, oedipal figure for Henry. Seen in that context, it could be that Henry doesn’t sleep with Mike’s girlfriend Pella as a woman, but as his mother. ‘I don’t think the reader has to believe Dr. Rachels, I hope that it isn’t presented in any sort of authoritative statement. I think the idea is more that there are many ways of thinking about these things and for one thing – that is most interesting for me in Henry’s life – he has sort of become able to think about things in a psychological way, which is something that he never attempted or never conceived of before. How much validity anyone, whether it is Henry or the reader or anyone else, is going to grant to Dr. Rachels’ analysis is up to them. I think there is probably some truth to it but it is also comically simplistic. I don’t expect anyone to buy it but I do think that it is very probable that that is what a psychologist would have said about their relationship at that point in time. It’s definitely not my personal opinion expressed through her, though. I wrote the whole book, you know.’

Harbach’s book contains a lot of allusions to *Moby Dick*. ‘The name Skrimshander is a very explicit allusion to *Moby Dick*. A skrimshander is someone who does whalebone carving. There is often a sort of Melvillian rhythm in the names or the language, whether explicitly so or sort of mimicking. Melville was very important to me and *Moby Dick* is such an important book. It’s a book that I love, but it also made a lot of sense, when I realized I wanted to write about this baseball team, to use *Moby Dick* as a backdrop. For me it is the best American novel about male friendship and the way men interact with one another, which really was the sort of book I wanted to write.’ It might seem improbable, but the two novels have got more in common than one might suspect. ‘There were just a lot of parallels between the whaling ship and a baseball team. You have these groups of guys drawn together in close quarters and go on a certain quest together. There is also something very basic about the fact that whaling is a large and dark business that is largely predicated on throwing things. So it seems to fit in a whole lot of different ways. And besides, it was a lot of fun, and in some respects very easy to play with. I knew a lot about Melville’s career and so it was amusing to use it and pay homage to it in a playful way.’

Not only Melville comes to mind when reading *The Art of Fielding*, Harbach’s novel has been compared to a lot of other American authors as well, but these analogies aren’t always as accurate. ‘I’ve heard a lot of comparisons to other writers. It is funny

how confident some people get, saying: “I can’t believe that this writer looks so much like this other writer, and took so many things of this other writer’s work.” Well, I am not so well-read, so probably three-quarters of the time I haven’t even read the books that I am being compared to. The comparison I have heard most often is one to John Irving’s *Prayer for Owen Meany*, which obviously has a character named Owen, and also a character that gets killed by a baseball. For some people it is very flattering, others say that I stole it and that I shouldn’t have done that, but I have never even read that book. There are many examples of that. People tend to make comparisons to other books they read but a lot of times it is at random. I like Jonathan Franzen’s work very much, but many people have interpreted the scene where Mike’s girlfriend Pella swallows her earring as a homage to a scene in *Freedom*, where Joey Berglund swallows his wedding ring. People forget that I was done and the book was turned in before *Freedom* came out so it certainly could not have been a homage to it. Often these questions of comparison depend on the reader so it is hard to make much of them. There are writers who have written about American sports in a way that I like very much, especially David Foster Wallace and Don DeLillo. I think my novel certainly fits in with some of their work, even if it doesn’t necessarily mean being right up there. But I think my book takes some cues from them in terms of thinking about how serious athletics and American society fit together.’

Between the start of writing *The Art of Fielding* and the publication of the novel a lot of technological changes were made in society. On the one hand the novel seems up-to-date when characters use their mobile phones, on the other hand the students at Westish College still have answering machines in their dorms. This seems to be a strange combination of mechanical devices. ‘Since it took ten years to write the novel, I had to change parts because of technological innovations. Anywhere that there is an iPhone or a Blackberry in the novel it was probably added at a later stage, because I started the book in 2000 and a lot of these things didn’t exist back then. And even when they did come to exist I was always several years behind so these things had to be around for a while before I became aware of what was going on. I brought it up to the present in some ways, but doing so I also felt that the world of the book allowed it to be a little bit out of date. I do think that these liberal arts colleges are a kind of world in itself, places where you are away from the rest of the world, and where there is some sort of antique feel to the pace of life. And especially with guys like Henry and Mike, who are so devoted, that parts of their life have very little to do with technology and communication and so in a way they have a sort of monkish life about them. I wasn’t trying to be obscure about it, I wanted the book to be set in the present day and I didn’t want to be too dramatically wrong about that setting. But I think there are more ways to engage with the contemporary world than through technology only.’ What Harbach perhaps means with engagement with the contemporary world is the tolerance towards gays portrayed in the novel. There is a dialectic going on between tolerance and intolerance. When asked about this dialectic Harbach answers evasive, which might have to do with the homophobic hate mail he received about his portrayal of

gays. In relation to his novel Harbach answers: ‘Intolerance leads in a direct and overt way to death.’

Harbach wrote a fictional novel within the novel: the shortstop Rodriguez Aparicio’s *The Art of Fielding*. One of his statements is: ‘It always saddens me to leave the field. Even fielding the final out to win the World Series, deep in the truest part of me, felt like death.’ Could the reader regard this as an analogy to the completion of a novel? ‘You could see that as an analogy, but I suppose the crucial difference in writing the book is that you, as a writer, get to choose when it ends. I think that that feeling and my fears about finishing were probably part of the reason why it took me so long to finish. I think I was feeling post-partum already a long time before I finished the book so I was sort of drawing out the process. By the time I actually finished it, it didn’t feel like death anymore. It was so belated and I was really truly ready to be done with the book, so I think I kind of indulged those feelings along the way.’

A second statement that could tell the reader something about what it is like to write a novel is Aparicio’s statement: ‘There are three stages: Thoughtless being. Thought. Return to thoughtless being.’ ‘I think this is probably my description of what the whole book is about. It is what Henry goes through. Certainly, when I’m writing the parts about what Henry’s goes through, I am drawing on my experiences as an athlete and my observations of athletes and everything I know about that world, but mostly, I am writing about writing. When I write about Henry’s struggles I am mostly writing about my own struggles to become a writer, and I’m sort of disguising it because it is very boring to write about the struggle of becoming a writer. I think there are a lot of connections and deep similarities between baseball – maybe any sport – and writing. And finding that line between thought and thoughtlessness and trying to get at a sort of enlightened thoughtlessness, that is really at the core of what you are trying to do when you make art.’

‘Testing around some different things’

n+1 has published a couple of books so far, there is for instance the ‘hipsterbook’ we came across. ‘They are largely projects of one or another of the editors. I think as we go on publishing it’s going to be a bigger and bigger part of what we do. But so far the books we’ve done have mostly been projects conceived of or spearheaded by one of the editors. Mark Greif was behind *What Was the Hipster?* and we have a book coming out very soon called *It’s No Good*, which we did in conjunction with Ugly Duckling, a poetry press in New York. It’s the work of the Russian poet and political activist Kirill Medvedev, who got published in *n+1* several times. We just think he is a brilliant writer. Keith Gessen translates Medvedev, so that’s his project. And I’m working on a book that’s going to be based around a piece I wrote for *n+1*. I wrote an essay last year called “MFA vs. NYC” which is about American writers and how they live and make money.’ The piece ‘Master of Fine Arts vs. New York City’ is about Harbach’s vision on current literary cultures in the United States. He noticed a significant difference between the educated ‘MFA writing program’ authors from the universities and the New York City

based authors. 'I am making a book for *n+1* about it, but I won't be writing the entire book myself. It is more like a compilation of essays that I put together and will be editing. So that is a project I am spending a lot of time on now, but it is not exactly a writing project. As far as fiction goes, I finished *The Art of Fielding* right before it came out, and then of course I spent many months being a sort of full-time publicist for the book. So I'm at the point of writing fiction again just now. That's what I'm doing, but it's in an exploratory way, in which I am testing around some different things.'