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## **An Interview with Timmy Reed by James Prenatt**

Baltimore has a thriving Literature scene, perhaps one of the lesser known in the country. Nonetheless, it is home to a number of successful writers and anywhere from one to three readings or open mics a week as well as being home to The University of Baltimore MFA in Creative Writing & Publishing Arts and the Johns Hopkins writing seminars. Baltimore native Timmy Reed is perhaps one of the most productive of writers working out of Charm City with several novels, chapbooks, and short stories in publication. We corresponded through e-mail and talked about writing, teaching, and the influence Baltimore had had on his work.

**JP: Did you grow up in Baltimore? And if so, do you think it's had an affect on your writing, or does it have an affect now? Many if your stories are set here. Do you think they have to be or do you choose the city because it's familiar?**

TR:

I grew up here in Baltimore. My family has been in the city for many generations - we don't get out much. As far as the ways the city has had an effect on my writing, there are so many it is hard to pinpoint them all. First, the city has shaped my identity and my worldview in every aspect of my life simply because The Land of Pleasant Living has always been my environment, the way a house cat's worldview is formed by the shape of the apartment where he lives. Baltimore has a very unique regional culture that has always made it feel like a bit of an outsider city, its own place, someplace separate from the America I saw on television and in the movies. We aren't the north and we aren't the south. We are a city that often feels like a small town. The city is blue collar and also blue-blooded. There are hundreds of distinct neighborhoods to explore and it feels like everyone knows each other or at least other's cousin. There is also a have an almost fatalistic, self-deprecating streak in our city's make-up while maintaining a fierce local pride, as well as a deep embrace of eccentricity to the point that it is normal to be weird and weird to be normal. I think that - as well as reasonable rent, great geography and access to many cultural institutions - has bred a wonderful arts/music/literature/food scene that feeds off itself and the city, growing and supporting each other. I feel like my work has always come out of that.

In terms of setting my short stories and novels here, I often do but I have also written about many other places. *Star Backwards* took place in Los Angeles as well as Baltimore,

*Miraculous Fauna* began in Baltimore but went all over the country without returning, *The Ghosts That Surrounded Them* takes place in a sort of nameless suburb that very

much resembles the suburbs north of Baltimore, but I really wanted the book to feel like it could take place anywhere. *IRL* on the other hand, felt like it had to take place in Baltimore.

I have a novel coming out next year with Counterpoint Press (Stay tuned!) and that is a story that also seemed to require certain parts of Baltimore as the setting - I wouldn't have known how to write it taking place anywhere else. But in general, I think no matter where the story takes place somehow the Baltimore-vibes creep into what I am writing.

**JP: As a teacher do you feel your teaching distracts from writing time, or do you believe it compliments your work?**

TR:

Teaching definitely takes time away from writing, but I don't think that is such a bad thing. I think I need time away from writing - and I also need the income of course. Working with students gives me insight into my writing sometimes, but more importantly it gives me insight into so many different people's lives and experiences and opinions and dreams each semester. I teach at three different schools (English at Stevenson University and Community College of Baltimore County/ English as a Second Language at Morgan State University) and have had students from all over the world and all walks of life in my classroom, each with the same goal of learning something valuable. Teaching is enriching for me not only as a writer, but as a human being. It keeps me outside of my own head, which can be a problem when I am writing a lot of fiction - especially the long stuff, like novels. I can get mired in my own ideas or my characters' ideas and forget about all of the potential that exists in the universe around me. It is easy to begin to think you know what you are doing sometimes, but teaching cures you of all that on a daily basis.

**JP: How do you feel about working with smaller presses? What are its advantages and disadvantages?**

TR:

I started working with small presses because most of the new fiction that I read that excites me comes out of the small press world. Plus, before I had an agent it was just much easier to get into contact and network with those editors. Now I have a great agent (shout out to Madison Smartt Bell) and while I am certainly open to publishing with one of the Big 5 publishers in the future, I thoroughly enjoy the amount of attention, assistance, and freedom that working with smaller presses provides. In both cases, chances are that you are going to be doing a lot of the marketing yourself so I think it is just a case-by-case kind of thing. Which press is right for the book? I firmly believe that

all books and short stories will find the home that fits them best if you aid them in search. I will say that I think small presses have a lot more freedom and seem to be more inclined to experiment or try new things whether that is a new manuscript or a book cover, strange title or marketing plan, if only because they do not have as much money on the line.

**JP: Who are some writers that you feel you've learned the most from and taken a lot of inspiration from?**

TR:

Oh, golly. here is a short list off the top of my head: John Gardner, Joan Didion, Donald Barthelme, Amos Tutuola, Denis Johnson, Mrozek, Celine, Mencken, Poe, Kafka, Borges, O'Connor, Baldwin, Wodehouse, Elizabeth Bishop, James Tate. Charles Simic, Patrick McCabe, Dixon, Barth...All the amazing teachers I've had like Carol Ann Davis, Bret Lott, Jessica Anya Blau, Jane Delury, Marion Winik...also tons of local writers here in Baltimore influence me on a daily basis as well as writers coming through and writers I read and meet online. This is one of those questions I should probably just write a book about.

**JP: What is your writing process like? I find there's two types of writers: those who plan and outline carefully and those who just go for it and write, though some fall somewhere between. Where do you typically fall?**

I think I fall somewhere in between. There are some stories and novels that I have made lots of visual charts and outlines and notecards, Post-it Notes, and drawings, while others just sort come out word-by-word as I work my way through them. I have had short stories that basically came out whole, complete in one short sitting and i never needed to change a word. I have also cut about 400 pages off of a novel at one point. It is always about what the story calls for in my case. I am not very good at making decisions in regards to my writing habits or my (lack of) discipline, so i always feel more comfortable if I listen and pay attention to the story because it is usually telling me how it wants me to work. It is like I am giving it a massage. the act of writing is about the story, not me. I am just here to make sure it feels right in the end.

**JP: Your story "Birds and Other Things We Place in Our Hearts" has been adapted into a short film. What's that process been like and how does it feel to see your work come to life on screen?**

TR:

It has been a very cool process, although I cannot say I am very involved. Maybe that is what is so cool about it. The film is being produced by a woman from Columbia

University in Chicago named Saeedah Zahrah and I am very excited to see it when it comes out. She contacted me online to talk about the acquiring the rights to the story and I met with her at a bar on North Avenue here in Baltimore not too long after that to discuss it in person.

The story itself (Here is a link: <http://necessaryfiction.com/stories/TimmyReedBirdsAndOtherThingsWePlacesInOurHearts>) is fairly short and does not have a lot of specifics. It was purposefully vague because I wanted any reader to be able to identify with either of the two characters in the story. So I didn't give genders, races, jobs, backgrounds to the characters at all really. It has been fun to see Saeedah create her own version of the story where she can fill in those blanks for herself and create her own world based on my idea. So far I have seen the trailer (Here is a link to that: <https://vimeo.com/175966935>) and it looks really beautiful. I don't really think of it as my work up on the screen, I more think of it as Saeedah and her whole team's work. I am just glad to have been able to inspire a group of talented people like that.

**JP: Writing is a tough business. What keeps you going?**

TR:

The encouragement of other people in my life is very important but it has to be more than that, something personal to me or I wouldn't still be doing it. At all times, I realize that the world would fully be okay if I never wrote another piece of fiction and yet I spend all this time dreaming up these stories anyway. I am not sure why I write, if I am being honest with myself. I think that the day I know the answer to this question will be the day I will no longer feel the need to write fiction. Luckily, my thoughts and opinions are subject to change and even being completely forgotten at any moment, so I am sure I will pick up the pen again the next day.

Timmy Reed is a writer and teacher from Baltimore, Maryland. He is the author of Tell God I Don't Exist, The Ghosts That Surrounded Them, Miraculous Fauna, Star Backwards, and IRL as well as a couple of chapbooks: Stray/Pest and Zeb And Bunny Build Russian Dolls. He has been featured in the Wigleaf Top 50 on multiple occasions and won a 2015 Baker Artist Awards B-Grant. Represented by Madison Smartt Bell at Pande Literary. Learn more here: <https://underratedanimals.wordpress.com>