Ethan Feuer & Piers Gelly

A Conversation with Jesse Ball

November of 2017, the University of Virginia had the great pleasure and good fortune to host the writer Jesse Ball (1978—). His generous contributions to the community included a public reading, a craft talk, and an interview with the undersigned.

Across some fifteen books, Ball's work steps lightly from prose to poetry and back, always characterized by a playful approach to language and to narrative world. As in the novels of Italo Calvino, Ball's books take little for granted when it comes to the conventions of realism; as Ball observes below, "Realism isn't how the mind actually works; it's the way everyone agrees it works." Ball's novels take place in labyrinthine and Kafkaesque institutions for incurable liars (*Samedi the Deafness*), in dreamlike stories-within-stories (*The Way Through Doors*), in puppet shows (*The Curfew*), in manifestos (*How to Set a Fire and Why*), and in eerie potemkin villages set against a vast, hazy dystopian backdrop (*A Cure for Suicide*). But wherever these stories unfold, they are unified by Ball's commitment to the pursuit of truth through fiction.

His latest novel, *Census*, concerns the journey of a terminally ill census-taker across the landscape of a nameless country, alongside his adult son, who has Down's Syndrome. In a preface, Ball describes the book as "hollow," in that it represents its central figure, the son, through his effect rather than description or direct dialogue. The effort is both craft and catharsis to Ball, who struggled to write about his own brother, Abram, who had Down's Syndrome and died in 1998 at the age of 24.

Ball's portrait feels all the more real for its subtlety. It is impossible not to admire the strange, crisp, bittersweet familiarity of Ball's writing in *Census*. We admired this book terribly, and were eager to speak with him about it.

Ball is the 2008 winner of the Plimpton Prize, and the recipient of numerous other honors, including the long-list for the National Book Award, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the NEA, and Creative Capital. He is a distinguished professor at the School of

the Art Institute of Chicago, where he gives courses on lying, lucid dreaming, and walking, the last of which formed the basis of our interview with him. On a crisp November morning we met at his hotel near the University of Virginia, and walked for one hour. Our course took us along Jefferson Park Avenue to West Main Street, onto Charlottesville's downtown mall, through Emancipation Park, and ended at Maplewood Cemetery.

Meridian: How should one begin a walk?

Jesse Ball: Impetuously.

Do you carry things with you when you walk? I know Halldór Laxness would leave his house with a single piece of paper and a pencil every time he walked.

I often have a piece of paper. I used to carry notebooks but I switched over to pieces of paper. Depending upon the length of the walk, if I decide not to bring money with me, I might bring some kind of provision, like an apple or something like that. One of the assignments in my walking class is to go out and walk in the city for many hours, eight hours or something, with no wallet and no phone. So you just have to actually be out there in the world.

It's pretty funny how quickly you become just a person in the outdoors. Like if you don't have your supplies with you, your tools—

You have to ask other people for help, which is terrifying.

And does that inform the course that you take? And if so, how?

I don't know exactly what the students do on their walks. Their walks should be quite different from mine, I imagine. But I don't advise them to go and talk to strangers all the time, probably from some legalistic point of view it would be problematic. I just make them go wander around. The first day, you have to plot where you usually go,

on a map, and the students are always horrified to discover that they basically are like robots, running back and forth on some kind of track. So then it has to be expanded to go all over the city. And Chicago is very stratified, so that even many people who have lived there for their whole lives haven't gone to certain neighborhoods and done certain things, you know?

So do you work them up to the eight-hour walk? Do you give them smaller walks to do?

Well, I never know if they actually do any of the things. They tell me they do it. But it's unclear. I don't have a GPS monitor on them.

They could be lying to you about the entire thing.

Some of them do. But the thing I don't like is when someone confesses to me that they didn't do the thing. I would rather that they just lie and say that they did it. They should be ashamed to not do it. Some of them are not ashamed enough.

When you first taught the walking class, did you have a really clear idea of how you wanted to teach the class?

It's pretty easy to come up with things. You have a group of people who are eager to be alive, and almost anything that you pick, if everyone does it and then comes back and talks about it, it is going to be interesting. Even if it's something like, Go and dig a hole.

Have you taught that class?

No. But for instance, there's that exercise that Marina Abramovic has, of you have to go hug a tree and then complain to it for fifteen minutes, and then come back. I used that one in one of my classes, and it was pretty pleasant. That one is a little embarrassing to be seen doing. You know? I think some of the students did it at night.

Covert tree complaining.

This one woman did it when she was waiting for the outdoor subway. She saw a tree in a park nearby so she ran over and did it right then, and then ran back and got on the train.

Do you talk to your students about looking while they're walking? Is that part of it, or merely just having gone out?

I think there's the active part of what you choose to do when you're doing the thing, and that's fine, but mostly the repetition of long walk after long walk after long walk, the way you end up thinking different things and having a different space in your body and mind, that's the more useful thing, you know? To not be a choice machine. A person who's constantly making choices. Just being in a space where you're walking and not thinking helps a person to see that what's best about themselves is not something they've chosen.

Do you ever take the subway with the express intent of walking somewhere you haven't been?

Definitely. I like to walk back from places.

Then you more or less know the ending of the plot.

Yes.

This place always smells really powerfully of these portable bathrooms. Well, it's interesting to me that you mentioned the idea of trying making fewer choices, because a lot of your books have endings that ask the reader to make some kind of choice. With Samedi the Deafness*, there's essentially a double ending, like, well, which is real? And* How to Set a Fire and Why *has this precipice, where Lucia announces what she's going to do, or rather, what she expects will happen, but it's up to us to figure out whether we believe it did. And* A Cure for Suicide *has this command to Hilda that's basically also a command to the reader—"What do you choose? Hurry now, hurry now, what do you choose?" And I wonder why that gesture is important to you.*

I know that it's the time to stop the book when the greatest number

of possibilities are preserved. If I continue and shut down more possibilities, it becomes less rich. I think it's important that the text should raise grave problems that are encountered in life, and furthermore make the reader complicit in those troubles.

Are there other ways of reaching ambiguity or uncertainty that you find yourself exploring besides plot?

I think description is quite a rich tool. For instance, let's say that you want to describe someone's anger at something. You don't actually have to describe it in reference to the person or the immediate thing, but you could put it nearby in the book. Like some immense anger, spread it over a nearby bush, you know?

Like that one?

Yeah, like this one. And it's sufficient. 'Cause in the text, you're reading about this thing, and then something else is observed, and it's just powerfully given over to this expression of rage, or whatever it is. So it's kind of like a practical use of the pathetic fallacy. You know, where the landscape is described in human terms.

Fabulism, and ambiguity of time and place, are very evident in your work, very rich, and I'm wondering if there are other ways that you think about cuing the reader that they're entering that mode.

I think of my books as being actually very realistic in a way. Obviously it's not "realism." To me, realism is a fake agreement that people have about how they're going to think really reductively about the world, a consensus vision of the world, and that's not interesting to me. Few and far between are places in my books where impossible things happen. Usually it is the world that we live in. It might be that the circumstances are set up so that it pretty clearly isn't the exact world that we live in. But I think that the way people ultimately behave, and the way that things are described in ambiguity, is truer to the actual way of life than some purportedly realistic mode.

That's really interesting to me. It makes me think of this n+1 *article*

called "The Rise of the Neuronovel," which looks at a bunch of novels that use avant-garde techniques to represent people who are neuro-atypical, like people with schizophrenia or Capgras Syndrome. The writer argues that if we start to think of these experimental techniques as belonging to certain kinds of disability, it actually re-encodes social realism as the way that the "normal" mind works.

I would say that social realism isn't the way that the mind actually works, it's the way that everyone agrees it works.

It's a convention.

And then you end up with a life that has a paucity of revelation.

In Census*, you make this choice never to have direct dialogue from the son, who has Down's Syndrome. I was really moved by it. There's a protective quality that the father has as he's describing his son. I also thought of the way that you use asterisks in* The Curfew *to represent sign language. You're able to describe these people who have various kinds of disability, but it's not in a way that either normalizes them completely or leaves them incomprehensible. I wonder how you think about those gestures.*

Well, it's a kind of jerry-rigging of the text. I think very little in my text is polished or perfect. It's sort of a rambling, semi-incoherent, cobbled-together thing. And so in those cases, that was just all I could do, or the best I could do. I certainly was not going to venture into a territory were the person who's mute—where the world considers that person to be deficient, or where I consider that person to be deficient, because I just don't, you know? So it would be almost impossible for the text to go that way. As for the boy in *Census*, it's just that the set of consensus ideas, of impressions and feelings, that redounds to people with Down's Syndrome, is completely bent and misappropriated and grotesque, such that you simply can't really—at least I couldn't—directly show such a person, like my brother, without inherently either caricaturing or responding to a caricature. And the pressure of either repelling that caricature or creating some preemptive defensive caricature was just too much, so I just avoided entirely. That was my idea. Having the book be this space that's hollow, with him at the center.

I noted that phrase in the preface, that you created a "hollow book," where he would be there "in his effect." I wonder whether you think of your other books as hollow in any way. Because I think many of us would say, to use that metaphor, This thing I'm writing is hollow, because there's a thing I want to talk about, but I can't talk about it. I have to approach it at an angle or a slant. Do you think about your other books that way, and why was it important for you to give the reader this biographical interpretive tool as they think about Census*? If you remove the forward, it's a different book.*

I found that the limitations of the reading public, to confidently assert choices as they read, makes it difficult for people to see that my work in general is really an extended social critique of the moral choices that have been made by the Western world. But instead the books are just thought of as being experimental literature. It's a terrible sandwich board to wear as you try to scuttle along the street. *The Curfew* did very well in Argentina, where they have a direct application of a similar totalitarian regime, and people being disappeared, and so they could read *The Curfew* and immediately know exactly what I was talking about, and like it and enjoy it, but here in the U.S., it just seems to be a book about puppets or something. People are so exhausted by any effort to think ambitiously in a political sense, to believe that the world could be otherwise than this slave democracy that we have, that they can't look at one of my texts and see a social critique, but only literature. And literature, to people, is dismissible. So, with this book, I wanted to make sure that the core of the meaning would not be dismissible.

Do you wish you had written such prefaces for other works? Having done this now?

No, in the course of time, I think it will be fine. I usually don't like having to explain things, since the book itself is the explanation

I'm thinking about Silence Once Begun, *which has a character named Jesse Ball. In* Census, *we've got stuff that makes it more clearly drawn from life. Do you think there's something more broadly going on in literature and in American life that demands proof?*

Not more than any other moment. But *Silence Once Begun* and *Census* are a bit different from the other books. *Silence Once Begun*, for instance, I didn't write with the idea of publishing it. I wrote it just because these unfortunate things had happened in my life. My first wife had mental issues, or you could say some kind of mental transformation. So I wrote this book as a way of dealing with it, for myself. So then the style was really markedly different. I would say that the books up until Silence tend to be pretty lyrical and predominately joyful—of course, awful things happen, but joyful as well. And after that, I decided to put away the lyrical toolbox.

Vera and Linus is kind of the apex of that. There's so much joy, so much grotesquery, and so much lyricality. The language is really just fantastic. But I was reading that at the same time as Census*, and it's night and day.*

Yes.

We both really loved Census. *We're both really excited to see it out in the world. It's sort of hard to say this without seeming backhanded, but I think it might be my favorite of your books.*

I hope that it does okay. You never know.

I wondered about the passage in Census *where the narrator observes that some people would help him and his son, whereas others wouldn't, and he says, Well, maybe it's just because they're kind, but maybe it's because I look like someone they knew. How arbitrary do you think our kindness is, and how does memory relate to that?*

In the judgment of whether kindness is arbitrary, memory would be one of the things brought as evidence in the trial. But as for the question of the importance of whether kindness or meaning is arbitrary, ultimately I think it just doesn't matter whether it is or not. That it is felt is sufficient. You know? That a person does something and is moved—we tend to think of intention being important in our actions, but effect is more important than intention.

You mentioned the other day that you generally type your books up, and I wonder whether you're thinking in terms of layout when you're doing it, or whether you make notes toward it, or put it into a design software afterward. I think of this idea in How to Set a Fire and Why, *that the any object on the test could be the test, including not finishing the test, and how so many objects of interpretation besides the words themselves are available. And I wonder at what stage you think of yourself as putting all these things on the page, or whether it's sequential—what is the order of operations?*

The design happens at the same time as the writing. Because otherwise there would be no way for me to feel the import of the larger font, for instance. Like, in *The Curfew*, where it's like, AND THEN TIME PASSED, or whatever. For me to feel that and take it into account, it has to be present then.

Do you think of the large fonts as louder? Like, spoken in a louder voice?

Maybe seen from farther away. Like a large thing seen from farther away.

One thing I really like about your work is the lightness, the space between things. Do you have to remove things to get that, or does it appear that way?

There are certain writers I love a lot. One would be Richard Brautigan. And Brautigan has the facility of—I think he must have been a very clear thinker, because even though sometimes he writes about these obnoxiously ridiculous things, the text is so crystalline that maybe it takes forty-five minutes to read a whole novel that he wrote. And at the end, it's all been beamed directly into your brain. You don't feel like you missed anything. I wanted in my prose to have this kind of Brautigan-like lucidity. The language is always throwing itself onto its feet and dancing along. At least that was the ambition.

When did you become interested in that? Because I can imagine that young Jesse Ball had no idea of what he wanted to do.

My prose when I was in college was leaden. But I always was writing poetry. And so the mode of thought I had when I was writing poetry was this resilient, on-the-balls-of-its-feet language. The trick was just how to take the language that I used in poetry and use it in fiction. I started with this book *Parables and Lies*, which I wrote while I was still in grad school. And then the first novel that I wrote was not *Samedi the Deafness*, but *The Way Through Doors*, and that one has a structure that makes it possible for the book to exist and carry its own weight with the writer having almost no structural sense of what's going to happen.

Yeah, all the telescoping this-within-that-within-that.

Yeah. So then the things that I have to pay attention to are fewer, in a construction like that. That was 2005. In June, I wrote *The Way Through Doors*. And then a couple months later, I was in this Scottish castle, and that's when I wrote *Samedi*. And by then I understood how to do it.

Having read Samedi*, it makes sense that you wrote it in a castle. The setting they're in, the Verasylum, is a pretty labyrinthine space. Let's go this way. Did you have the idea for the Verasylum before you got to the castle, or did you get to the castle and decide?*

I had an impression—I was in France, living there, and I woke up from a daydream and I had this image of a man turning around in the street, and as he was turning around, I felt an impression of some inchoate cloud, and I knew that that could be the heart of the book, it was something pregnant with meaning, and then I knew in a couple weeks I was going to be in Scotland, so I waited on it and adamantly refused to think about it until I was there. And then I wrote that book.

How do you adamantly refuse to think about anything, or one thing in particular?

It takes a lot of work. It's hard to do.

It seems like that old joke about don't think about an elephant. Do you find other things to think about? Like, I've got to think a lot about this rock.

No, I just dismiss it. And then I return to it. I'm obsessed with games, like Go and chess, so if I have to pass a week just playing Go all the time, I can easily do that. In fact, the harder thing is to not allow myself to play Go all the time.

What were your feelings when Google made the robot that could beat a master at Go?

This is very interesting, because when Kasparov played Deep Blue and lost, it was this real trauma for the western world and for chess, and everyone was really stressed out, despite the fact that ultimately the train beat John Henry, and you can't run faster than a car. So the western world is really bothered by that. In Go, there's this idea of the "hand of God," this perfect move, and all Go players just long for it. The game is so complicated. A way to think about the depth of a game is that, if you have someone who's never played, and someone can beat them seventy percent of the time, that's the first level. And then the person who can beat that person seventy percent of the time, that's the second level. And so chess has twelve such levels, from the base beginner to Magnus Carlsen—the best chess player. Go has twenty-five levels like that. So it's really deep.

But the interesting thing is that when these computers arose and started beating the best human players, the Go community met them with joy. It was magnificent. They were skeptical, just because Go programs had never even been good before this. But once they were good, every pro was overjoyed and so happy, and I think it points to something basically different about an eastern view of the mind and body. Because in a Buddhist view, the world is mechanistic, and you don't have this individual importance that you do in the Judeo-Christian tradition. I think that difference is at the heart of greeting our computer overlords with joy: Okay, I have to go through life and sort of be a servant all the time anyway, but the computer will show me the thing I long for the most, which is: which is the right place to put the stone?

The perfect move has been discovered, in some sense. It makes me think of this line in Under the Glacier*, the Halldór Laxness novel, where there's these guys sitting on the edge of a cliff, looking at some birds flying, and*

they're talking about how an airplane is the perfect way of flying, the correct way of flying, and all birds are basically failures. They're not the most efficient way to fly. And yet here they are. And how, just as no one has ever found the perfect formula for a bird, no one has ever found the perfect formula for a novel, and so novels are all in some sense imperfect versions of getting from A to B. What do you think about that?

I think novels are just a moment when someone blurts. Someone blurts something out. I think perfection of form can be judged only when meaning is obstructed. Given that the sufficiency of meaning is retained, the form just doesn't matter. I really prefer to read something that is badly written but has some elemental meaning at its core, than something that is beautifully written and vacuous.

I want to check out this tree.

Is it a Japanese maple?

I do not think so. The leaves look different.

Yeah, the leaves do look different. Actually, look, here's these little guys. Maybe it's an oak, actually. Like a different species of oak.

I wonder if this is by design, this gravestone with a tree growing out of it.

I think the grave predates the tree.

It looks like quite an old grave. Well, we thought about trying to get to a graveyard here at the end, because you're a man who's interested in graveyards.

Yeah, it's wonderful.

A cemeterist, you once called yourself.

That's right.

So can you talk a bit about that? I know, for instance, that your names for Samedi the Deafness *all came from a graveyard. One of those names, actually, is my name, which is a rare name. So I thought, that's weird.*

Well, I'm not a superstitious person. I'm pretty practical. And so cemeteries are all over the world. And everyone's afraid of them. They're beautiful, and they're completely ridiculous, because most people don't visit them except once in a long time. They're not for the people who died, they're for the people who are alive, and yet they're not really used very much. So it's this irrational, ridiculous space. What's not to like? I like going to different countries and seeing the different ones.

Is there a country you think does it really well, or that you, individually, admire?

I really like the ones that are in farm country, in the United States, where you'll just be walking in the woods, and suddenly you're in a cemetery, and it's completely overrun, no one takes care of it. I'd say that's my favorite. Cemeteries should definitely be more like playgrounds. And in fact, the cemetery behind my house when I was a kid, my friend and I always used to go there and play. And sled. And I hurt my tailbone because the graves were covered in snow and I ran one over with a sled, and the point of the top of the obelisk ripped through the sled and hit me in the tailbone, so that was pretty unpleasant. My friend was watching and he saw me: partway down the hill I stood up and fell down. Which is what happens if somebody comes along from under you and jabs you with an obelisk. But I think the most principal example of a ridiculous cemetery is one of those military ones, by Washington. You know, where all the graves are exactly the same and it goes on for miles and miles and miles and miles and miles. And in a way, in the absurdity, it ends up saying something very true, which is just: You have no face. We all have the same face. Although in south Chicago there's a cemetery, it's a bunch of Civil War dead, and so the captain has this really nice big stone or memorial, and then around him in rings are the privates, with these dinky little posts. Like they're still protecting him, for eternity. Like he's a pharaoh or something.

You have this character in The Curfew *who designs gravestones and*

helps people think of slogans. 'Slogans' is the wrong word. Epitaphs!

Although slogans would be funnier.

So a lot of these epitaphs are lies. There's an old man for whom they make his dates closer together so people will be more sad. And then there's somebody who, in order to represent them, they just have "Friend of cats." And I wonder if you have thought at all about how you'd like to be memorialized, either in stone or otherwise, after your death.

Well, there's a funny story. My brother and father and my mother's sister all died in quick succession in the late nineties. And my mom, rationally, figured that I was going to drop off, too. So she got a plot for me at the cemetery in Long Island. So I have this plot, it's there. And at some point I had a dream, and in the dream, something happened—my skull was compromised in some way. And I could feel that I was going to die. And as I was sitting there in the dream, beginning to die, I wrote this death poem on the wall. And then I remembered it and I told it to my mom, and went on my way during the day and even forgot about the dream. And then she had written it down and was planning to use that on the grave, when I would die. And so, I don't actually remember the text of the poem. But it was sufficient.

Were you like, This is a good death poem? I would be happy with this?

Yeah, I liked it.

Do you still have it somewhere?

She has it. In readiness.