SARAH FLYNN & ADAM O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

A Conversation with
Aimee Bender

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Jonathan Lethem has called Aimee Bender's work "visionary, but close to home." Her short fiction has appeared in such places as *GQ*, *The Paris Review*, and *Harper's*. Her first story collection, *The Girl In The Flammable Skirt* (Doubleday, 1998) was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year and spent seven weeks on the Los Angeles Times bestseller list. An *Entertainment Weekly* review of her second story collection, *Willful Creatures* (Doubleday, 2005), claimed that "to curl up with an Aimee Bender story is to thank heaven you ever learned to read in the first place."

Bender's work is widely known and imitated for its tendencies toward magical realism, but she doesn't like to see her work—which is also steeped in the realist tradition—chained to any particular style: "It doesn't matter if something is realistic or non-realistic," she says. "How someone phrases something is more important to me, if something is said in a new way." Some of that penchant for realism is evident in her novel, *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (Doubleday, 2004), a book the *New York Times Book Review* called "intelligent and engaging."

A native of Southern California, Ms. Bender received her BA from the University of California at San Diego, and her MFA from the University of California at Irvine. She now teaches at the University of Southern California. We met over lunch at Finn & Porter restaurant in Missoula, across the street from the University of Montana, where she was visiting the MFA program.

Bender accepts as many interview requests as any writer working today—a Google search for "Aimee Bender interview" yields almost 100,000 hits, from magazines to newspapers to individual bloggers.

ADAM O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

You must be a nice person to do so many interviews—

AIMEE BENDER

Writing is so weird. I like doing interviews because we talk about this thing that's impossible to talk about. We can't address it directly, but it's fun to talk around it.

SARAH FLYNN

In "The Meeting," you describe a man changed by the experience of moving his fingers down a woman's spine, writing, "It is these empty spaces you have to watch out for, as they flood up with feeling before you even realize what's happened." Can you remember a time in your life when you felt an empty space fill with feeling in this way?

BENDER

I think it happens a lot. But it's hard to pinpoint. Sometimes I'm slow trying to think of a response to questions directly from my life. What I would say first is: that kind of empty space that feeling floods into can be available to any feeling, but it's important to make the empty space available. Let's come back to that.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

The way you dodged that question recalls your answers to a lot of personal questions in interviews—do you avoid personal questions?

BENDER

It's not like I shroud anything exactly—I like direct questions. But it's harder for me to know how to talk about my own life specifically—I blank out and think, What is a moment I feel comfortable sharing that will both answer the question and not give away something too close to me? There's a back and forth, because of that withholding, that makes me feel a blankness of not being able to remember anything. I am cautious about what I share. I don't always like to know that much about people I read.

A genuine connection happens when someone reads, an intimacy occurs, and I don't want to flood that with, "Well, that character was

actually a conglomeration of one boyfriend plus my mom plus my sister plus someone I liked in third grade." Instead—by deliberately avoiding sharing everything about my life—I'm saying that it doesn't matter. I don't want reading my work to become an exercise in parsing out my biography. That act can invade what is actually a slightly stranger connection, when you don't have tidbits of information on an author's life. I like that when I read and when I write. I tend to be a private person anyway, so it should come as no surprise that what I write about isn't autobiographical, directly—though of course it is in some way—but I include those elements deliberately, too, as much as I protect myself, because I can be more honest about what I felt or what I experienced three times removed from the actual experience.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Did you hate literature classes in college?

BENDER

I struggled with lit classes, though sometimes I loved them. I struggled more when they leaned too heavily on biography. I don't get why it matters that we can say, "That was written when he was going through a dark period." Isn't the pain in the book? Isn't that the most beautiful way we can get that sense of pain?

FLYNN

The narrator of "Call My Name" and "Off" says that most people never see the hidden menace in her paintings. What do readers of your fiction miss?

BENDER

I'm not subtle. The violent impulses in my fiction are pretty much laid out on the table. I crave the opportunity to let out in the fiction some of the darker thoughts that are not as accessible in a regular conversation. An earlier version of me would have wanted to tuck the gun or the knife behind the cornhusk, as if to say, Is it okay? And then something in me burst forward and said, The gun should be in front of the cornhusk, the gun is more important.

A student asked me yesterday about some of the pitfalls of writing in a magical vein, and I told him that a potential pitfall is that it can seem too light or too whimsical and darling. Violence can ground magical fiction, make readers feel there are consequences. Flannery O'Connor said that violence can push a character to reveal him or herself within the frame of a story. Which makes it very different than violence in real life. Even though I feel like a protective person in my interactions with actual people, I like not protecting my characters.

It feels especially important as a female writer to be able to use violence, because—in both men and women, but especially in women writers—there can be an urge to protect characters. I had a student once who wrote a story about a hundred-foot woman romping through a city, and no one got hurt. She had this great violent image of strength and messy, harmful things happening, but you could see her inhibitions. Maybe some cars got squished and someone had a broken wrist or something really benign. We had a long discussion about it, that you have to allow there to be consequences, and that doesn't mean anything bad. It's freeing to the reader.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Did some of that impulse come directly from O'Connor?

BENDER

I love her, so yes. She's a huge influence in that way. She was so wise about how to articulate the importance of violence and also about the grotesque, and writing, and writing magically.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Many writers considered non-realists seem to love her. Though it's hard to categorize your work as strictly non-realist, especially your novel, *An Invisible Sign of My Own*. Do you feel that book was a departure for you?

BENDER

Sometimes I write realistically, though I always feel free to write non-realistically. I'm not more comfortable with one than the other. Writing

something longer was the big step, learning how to sustain that length. And I did find it more difficult to stay completely realistic. There were magical parts of the book that got cut, because I found it hard to sustain them for the length of a novel. It's much easier in a story.

FLYNN

So often, people ask you questions about the non-realistic elements of your fiction. What of the realist tradition do you see in your work?

BENDER

I started to write not long after everyone was trying to be Carver. I am still influenced by Carver; I admire his writing a lot. And I love Hemingway. I lean toward language the most. It doesn't matter if something is realistic or non-realistic. How someone phrases something is more important to me, if something is said in a new way. That freshness is all over Carver, every sentence a new invention.

FLYNN

You've said American readers tend to be more accepting of fiction with magical elements when it comes from other countries. Why do you think your writing has been so successful in the United States?

BENDER

I was lucky. The tide was shifting a little at that time. Judy Budnitz' book, *Flying Leap*, had come out the same year as *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, and there are a lot of similarities in the tone and the interest in magic. Then Julia Slavin's book, *The Woman Who Cut Off Her Leg at the Maidstone Club* came out. Stacey Richter's book, *My Date with Satan*, came out. So there were these few collections by women who pushed away from realism a little bit. And it wasn't like we were going back and forth; the timing was just good; there was a cluster.

Right now I don't feel like there's a set mood in American fiction, and the MFA field seems like it has a lot of space for different kinds of work. But at that time, there was movement away from the intense minimalist realism that dominated the 1980s and 1990s, the Richard Ford era. Everything was ready to be shook up. Then came the David Foster Wallaces and the Dave Eggers and there was a lot of space to

try to look at things in different ways. There was an appetite for it in readers and in writers.

FLYNN

You once suggested that American fiction has been hijacked by the "quiet epiphany." Could you explain in more detail what you meant by that?

BENDER

I was quoting Michael Chabon, who wrote about that in the introduction to *Thrilling Tales*, where he talks about the quiet epiphany being the dominant form in fiction right now and asks: What if every story in American fiction were a story about a nurse? Wouldn't that be the same thing as a quiet epiphany? I think he's right. We've all ingested through radio and TV and film a certain narrative way of thinking.

Here's an example: I have a friend who threw out her bed because she wanted a good relationship. She reached the point where she said to herself, I'm taking my bed and putting it out on the curb, and I'm going to buy a new bed and get a new man. She had the symbol set in her mind. But the internal stuff hadn't gone through her at all. She just decided one day what her life's short story would read like or what her film would look like—what the external representation of her quiet epiphany would look like. Throwing out the bed wasn't that quiet. But it wasn't a bomb, either. Maybe putting the pillow on the curb would be the story version of it.

It feels to me that there is a push toward that kind of epiphantic—is that a word?—moment. But it can be unearned, because those moments in life are big and rare and very meaningful. And I think it's a mistake to push those on all stories, the moment the character realizes something. I don't think all stories have to do that. The danger is that the stories start to feel like they plug into a system, where they put the bed out on the curb and feel like it means something, when it just means that you're watching the movie of your life that looks good. And that's different than something internal that can't be expressed with words.

FLYNN

What can a narrative that doesn't use the quiet epiphany do?

BENDER

I think there just has to be interesting movement in the story. Something has to change, but I don't think it has to be the character. There has to be some feeling that you as the reader have been moved, that something has shifted inside you based on what happens in the story. The story-reader experience doesn't have to exist inside the character. I so resist dictums about what a story needs to do.

There's a great writer in L.A. named Jim Krusoe who is not very well known, but he's wonderful. He has a book called *Blood Lake* that doesn't follow the quiet epiphany pattern. It's odd the way his characters change; the change follows more of a messy emotional pattern, so I have a much more emotional response to it, and that's enough. Or I think of stories in *Jesus' Son*. In some of them, somebody kind of changes but in some, they don't. I love that book. When I read "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," I remember thinking literally, in the clearest thoughts, My socks are knocked off. This is fucking unbelievable.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

During a podcast interview with you and David Wilson, founder of The Museum of Jurassic Technology—

BENDER

That museum is fantastic! Anyone who visits Los Angeles should go. It's the most curious museum—you can't tell what's real and what isn't real. You investigate ideas, discover things. They have this trailer park room. That was my favorite. There's a room with superstitious cures, some in beautifully lit little boxes. One's a strange dead bee on someone's wound. It's half researched, half imagined. Incredible. They displayed things like a piece of linen you place over your doorstep in order to have a healthy day.

If an artist has authority over the invention, I'm susceptible to believing in those things. I start to feel like, Maybe it's true—maybe all I've been missing when I have the flu is a piece of linen.

FLYNN

You mentioned once that an Alexander Calder mobile or a PJ Harvey song can be as inspiring to you as a book. What other art inspires you?

BENDER

Lately I've been listening to Beethoven, because people have been telling me, Hey, that guy's good. Turns out to be true. That Beethoven guy, he knew some stuff. [Laughs.] When I read a book, it's more of an immediate inspiration, but it's also more loaded, because it's what I want to try to do. If I listen to something, it comes with no desire to try to do that, I'm free to feel amazed.

I go to museums a lot. There was an art exhibit in L.A. by an artist named Vija Celmins, who takes photographs of the ocean, just waves, then draws them with pencil. She does the same thing with the night sky. So there are these incredibly detailed graphite drawings of water and sky, and they are just beautiful, really simple yet incredibly complex. I just saw Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a great play. Bill Irwin, who used to be a clown, played the husband, so he's got this great punch for physicality, and Kathleen Turner was also intense.

All of that stuff helps my work. But a specific example might be that a couple stories in *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* feel particularly PJ Harvey-influenced in the way they handle the "edge" to the female characters. Sometimes, conversations with people inspire stories. A conversation inspired the "Job's Jobs" story in *Willful Creatures* and also the "Motherfucker" story.

FLYNN

An Invisible Sign of My Own and several of your stories deal with illness. Has illness shaped your life?

BENDER

In certain ways. I have watched relatives here and there struggle with illness or with worrying about illness. I feel pretty tuned in to worry and concern. Parts of it relate to my particular life, parts to other generations, to what's inside a family at large. Grandmothers' stories, stuff like that. Illness is interesting to me literally and also metaphorically. The idea of sickness and pain and how people deal with it is interesting to me the same way that, for instance, in some of my stories, deformity, something externalized, can be used to reveal something internal to the character. That's tricky, though, because I don't want to blur the line between the two too much, as it can be hollow when the literal becomes merely a metaphor.

I never know when I start on a particular story which deformities a character might have. And when one comes up, I try to hold back on being sure why, because that can get in the way. What I like about writing that sort of thing is that it's all really physical. It gives me a lot of space as a writer to explore the physical, by giving it limitations and not worrying about what they mean.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Are you an atheist?

BENDER

I'm not an atheist, because atheism feels like the far far end, saying there's nothing. But I don't believe in any organizing principle or any kind of god figure. I grew up Jewish, but not religious. No God-believers in the house—very much just cultural. I went through the whole education, though, got bat mitzvahed and confirmed, and went to Jewish camp and sang the songs. I loved all that. And I've been learning more in the past few years about the tradition. I like reading religious writing, a lot, because I think it's beautiful. When people get on the anti-organized religion bandwagon and say it's all crap, it seems like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There have been so many smart people writing through the centuries about the complexities of thinking and ideas and meaning, and that's interesting even if you don't believe in God.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Who would you like to see be the next U.S. president?

BENDER

People never ask me about politics. Stephen Elliott's book, *Looking Forward to It*, about him tracking the 2004 election, is a fun book that's completely heart-wrenching, because it sucks the glamour out of the process, and all of the presidential contenders seem kind of nutty. But right now, I'm in the Barack Obama camp, because he's the man of the moment, the exciting one. Maybe that makes him seem more electable to me. I keep debating with people whether Hillary Clinton can get elected or not. I feel hopeful that the president will be a much more

thoughtful person than the present one. It seems likely that, whoever it is, the person will be more thoughtful. This is a huge election.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

What have you been reading?

BENDER

Michael Pollan, a nonfiction writer who wrote *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. He's a fantastically interesting thinker. He wrote a book about evolution through gardening, *Second Nature*, that I really got into, about weeds and humans having an interaction, because weeds usually grow specifically around human structures. There's a weed that's biologically programmed to multiply when hit by a hoe. It will not multiply in nature; a human has to be present.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Another prominent UC–Irvine graduate told me: "Now everyone applying to MFA programs tries to write like Aimee Bender." Why do you think your work inspires widespread imitation?

BENDER

When I started writing, I felt that writing in any magical style was forbidden, bad, non-literary. So when I got good responses to my work and felt encouraged to go toward that style, I felt invigorated, like I had permission; I was on a rampage of freedom. I hope that feeling of freedom is contagious, that you can write whatever you want. It makes me feel good to think I may contribute to that.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Could that freedom become a prison?

BENDER

Yes. Whenever I try to imitate other writers, it can be fun for a while, then it can take me away from what I really want to do. There is so much to sort through while looking for one's own voice and interests

as a writer. But I'm flattered that people are imitating me, and it's also a surprise, because I don't run into it very often in my teaching—although I mostly teach undergrads, and many don't know who the hell writes in America anyway. Some do. But many haven't read a book in a while and are just coming to writing, so I'm trying to usher them into the idea of contemporary writers. I like teaching undergrads. They're lively and have strong opinions that aren't always careful opinions, which is nice.

FLYNN

Do any of your experiences as an elementary school teacher or as a college professor find their way into your writing?

BENDER

Teaching kids influenced *An Invisible Sign of My Own* a lot. I was missing the little kids, so it was fun to make up a new crop and hang out with them. Kids are a huge influence on how I teach writing. They are so creative in such a loose way, in contrast to a room of twenty-year-olds—there's something about adolescence that messes with raw creativity. Adolescents often write poems called "Time and Life" or "Life is Truth." I know I did. Somehow, as a kid, you know specificity, you know to show not tell, you know leaps of thought and spontaneity. Then you kind of lose it for a while in the great weight and gravitas of being fifteen, then by twenty, you try to get back to that seven-year-old without losing the growth.

FLYNN

How do you try to get back to that original creativity?

BENDER

I occasionally do writing exercises, but mostly I just sit, trying to find something I'm interested in writing about. Some days I'll sit for hours, floating from style to style, really really bored. But I'm getting more convinced that boredom is a crucial intermediary stage, that if you sit through boredom, you get to something. It's proven true for me. There's this great essay called "On Being Bored" by a British psychoanalyst named Adam Phillips. He says that when a kid tells a

parent, "I'm bored," the urge for the parent is to fill the space and say, "Go play with your trains, Honey," but if the parent could just say, "Oh, you're bored," it would help people. I love the idea that you don't have to cure boredom, that it's transitional, it gets you to the next step, that on the other side of the boredom, imagination kicks in. I think it's very smart, and contradictory to the enormous amount of input we're getting all the time to distract us. I actually assigned my students recently, "Go be bored for an hour," and a couple of them practically had panic attacks. They said, "How can I do that? I have MySpace, I have Facebook, I have the Internet. No way." But some of them took it seriously. One guy said he just lay on his bed, and his roommate walked by and asked him what he was doing lying on his bed. The kid said, "Being bored, dude. It's my assignment."

FLYNN

Your stories aren't driven by character or plot alone. What drives them?

BENDER

This came up in my workshop yesterday, because it's a big part of my teaching and my writing in general. I always tell students to skip over character and plot. The way I read and teach is to look at language. I look for places the language is working, because to me the story is where the language is working. Where the language is not working, sometimes you can tweak that language and nail it and make it work, but mostly I've found that it's actually filler, distracted writing, or forced writing. Only in places where the sentences have a certain natural flow do you find the story or characters. So I think language is the driving force of my work, because it's what I follow. When I'm teaching, it feels like there's this pressure to conform stories to a certain given plot that the writer thinks the story is about, when that's not often true. The language is the clue to where the story is. In my own work, I look for places that still interest me, that I enjoy rereading. But the best indication is when how something's phrased pleases me in a way that feels like more than tricky phrasing.

In that workshop yesterday I read a student's story about writing, and there was a line in the middle that read something like, "The writer

and the white woman sat." That line felt really good where it was. It was so good, in the context of the story, because it said something about the character, about how uncomfortable she was sitting. It was this very plain, almost awkward sentence, but it had something in it. So the language doesn't have to be pretty at all—in fact, the pretty ones often feel too written—it's more about movement and rhythm and context.

FLYNN

You said once that words have tunnels inside of them, and you don't know how deep each tunnel will go, but a certain noun might be a tunnel that could last the length of a novel. How do you decide which tunnels to explore?

BENDER

Since writing is this weird, uncertain process, I don't know which nouns will become one of those tunnels that will last for a novel. I have to bumble around. In my way of working—and there are certainly more efficient ways than mine—a lot of pages get cut. I think, "Ooh, I want to write about this," then I write thirty pages on a character and it goes nowhere. I have nothing else to say about that character. But then I have lots to write about a minor character on the side. The word "haystack" went eighty pages, but a tangent about the railroad made something. Certain words sort of carry questions with them. Others don't, they're duds. You can't know which words are packed with enough feelings and associations and ideas until you bumble around for a while, which is frustrating. But it's also thrilling to explore the unknown.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Which noun spurred *An Invisible Sign of My Own*?

BENDER

Numbers. I was a year into the book when I started writing about numbers. I liked the idea of seeing the "50" sign on the lawn, which marked the death. I liked that scene, but it didn't fit with anything I was writing, so I figured I should just cut the scene, but I ended up cutting the other hundred pages and keeping the scene. Then numbers

exploded on the pages, and they helped shape the book. But I couldn't have predicted that, I couldn't have started the book knowing that; I needed to spend enough time with it. You need to spend time to find the word that has weight.