

AWWorld

Interview with Ben H. Winters by Melissa Hartman

Ben Winters says that he was “probably bound to be a writer of some kind,” but he has actually become a writer of almost every kind. He wrote the books and lyrics for three musicals for young audiences: *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, *A (Tooth) Fairy Tale*, and *Uncle Pirate*. He is the author of two novels for middle-grade readers, *The Secret Life of Ms. Finkleman* and *The Mystery of the Missing Everything*; a supernatural thriller for adults, *Bedbugs*, which has been optioned for film; two mashups of classic novels, *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (a *New York Times* bestseller) and *Android Karenina*; and *The Last Policeman*, a detective novel. He is now working on a sequel to that novel, as well as a book of scary poems for kids to be released next year.



Can you tell me a little about how your interest in writing developed? Were you always interested in stories?

Definitely. When I was in fourth or fifth grade, I wrote a series of stories about a pig named Piggy-Wiggy, which I remember vividly. Basically, Piggy-Wiggy would have an adventure, and then he would die in a surfing accident, or be eaten by a shark, or fall off a cliff. They were your basic fourth-grade-boy adventure stories. They were each about a page and a half long. My friend would illustrate them and then we would pass them around. That was my first memory of wanting to write something and have people respond to it.

What kind of books did you read as a kid?

I read a lot of fantasy and science fiction. I read Orson Scott Card. I read Philip José Farmer’s Riverworld series when I was probably too young to understand them, and *The Phantom Tollbooth*, which is a great, great book. *Tuck Everlasting* is another one that really stayed with me.

I also loved comic books. Truthfully, most of my reading before I was in high school was probably comic books, which I still love.

How did you go about publishing your first book?

It was a weird process by which I became a professional novelist. My wife and I were living in Philadelphia for a year, and we

lived literally across the street from this publishing company called Quirk Books. I met the people who worked there and got to know them, and I wrote a couple of small, goofy non-fiction things for them.

A couple of years later, they had this huge success that was surprising even to them—a book called *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which became a phenomenon out of nowhere. They knew they wanted to do a sequel, and fast. The guy who had written the original book wasn’t interested in doing another one, so they asked me. My editor called and said, “It’s going to be called *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*. You’ll be turning Jane Austen’s novel into an action adventure novel.” I started that day. And that book, because it was coming on the heels of this huge novel, was a big hit. Suddenly I was a fiction writer.

I wrote another book in that series, called *Android Karenina*, but when they asked if I wanted to do another one, I said no. I didn’t want to wake up in 20 years and be the guy who just wrote those novels.

Your latest book is summed up on its cover by this question: “What’s the point of solving murders if we’re all going to die soon, anyway?”

Right. It’s a detective novel set six months before a giant asteroid is going to strike Earth, and my hero is a homicide detective who is nevertheless trying to solve a murder.

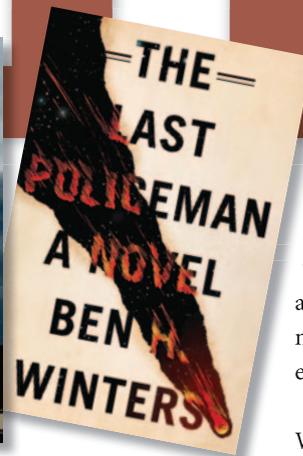
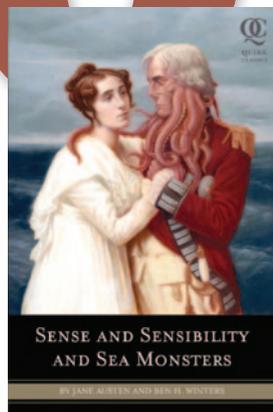
I wanted to create a character almost pathologically committed to his work. In figuring out how to frame that, I came up with the idea of having him work when nobody else is really working. That’s how I got to the end of the world—I wondered in what situation there would be no point in solving murders.

But Detective Hank Palace sees a point.

Yes. He’s just a simple, small-town guy, but he’s a hero. He believes in doing what’s right, no matter what. I’m really enjoying writing the second book because I love this character. It’s going to be a trilogy, and at the end of the third book, I’m going to have to kill him. The world is actually going to end. So it’s kind of a bummer.

But part of what’s fun about writing it, and hopefully reading it, is seeing the different ways that the world is going to pieces.

Full of Stories



With each book, and even in subsequent chapters, you get to see this progressive degeneration, which is really interesting to plot out.

It sounds scary.

It's totally scary. And it puts things in perspective. The world has almost ended multiple times since it began. Two hundred fifty-one million years ago, there was the Permian Extinction. Then there was the KT Boundary, where the dinosaurs died. Life is not as enduring as it appears to be to us. We are just a very, very brief interval in the lifespan of a planet. That is really bracing to think about—but it's also an interesting backdrop for fiction.

And it sounds like you have to do some interesting research.

Oh, yeah. I'm calling economists and sociologists and psychologists. I spoke to an expert on the sociology of disaster—how people respond in the face of crisis and after a crisis. I've spoken to agricultural economists to find out what

would happen if most of the farmers just stopped planting (because what's the point?). How would that play out, in terms of food supply?

You've got to do research. You have to learn, and you have to read other books. You can't just say, "I'm going to think of ideas, and they're going to be great ideas." The fruits of your imagination will be much better if you till the soil with lots of interesting inputs from the world around you.

This sounds like advice you've given before.

I teach writing to both kids and adults, and I'm really big on getting beyond the problem of "I can't think of any ideas." Ideas are the easy part. Read a newspaper. Walk down the street and

eavesdrop on people talking on their phones. The world is full of ideas. If you can't come up with an idea, then you're not reading enough, or you're not taking enough walks. You're not being engaged enough in the world.

The hard part is turning an idea into a story. What are the arcs? What's the rise and fall? What are the conflicts? What is the ending that is satisfying and unexpected?

Is there advice that you think young writers hear too much?

Yes: "Write what you know." You hear it a lot and it is total nonsense. It's reductive. It leads people to think they have to write their own story about growing up in suburban wherever and the night their parents yelled at each other.

There are so many interesting stories out there beyond your own limited realm of experience. It's not enough just to report on what is happening to you. Even if you are an essayist, your own experience, untransformed, is really interesting only to you. You have to use that experience to tell a story about something bigger than yourself. **i**