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The CutBank Interview with Aimee Bender

Aimee Bender

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*Aimee Bender, author of Girl in the Flammable Skirt
and An Invisible Sign of My Own,
agreed to ponder some of life's imponderables,
compiled by the CutBank staff.*

HOW DOES AIMEE BENDER FEEL ABOUT...

Lemon drops?

Nicely, this reminds me of Haruki Murakami, a writer I can talk about forever. In his novel, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, the main character, Toru, quits smoking and takes up lemon drops instead. This book is one of the very best books I've read in so long about writing, under the surface. It's not about writing in topic, but somehow I learn huge things from it, as a writer. It unfolds with such a gentle patience, and reading it—even though it is often excruciatingly violent—is somehow a calming experience because his hand is so sure. I've been thinking a lot about intention with Murakami. Not calculated intention, but some kind of intuitive intention, if that makes sense. He writes some outrageous stuff that in the hands of someone else would just be stupid or inane, but somehow, because he is so behind every single sentence, I fall for it fully.

The mural in the ladies' toilet?

I imagine it in the actual toilet itself. So it's temporary. It will only last until someone comes in and flushes. But the artist went in with some paintbrushes and paints and dripped them down into the bowl and swirled them into the water until she made what she wanted to. It's of a horse but it's fairly abstract. It has to be, because the water still moves slightly with the banging of doors and those sinks turning on and off. Ripples, which make the horse run. It has no mane, yet. And although this may offend some readers, the mural is meant to be in the toilet, it is meant for participation, as the artist does not use yellow, but allows the next pee-er to come in and finish the picture. Give that horse a mane. Some find this gross and flush as fast as they can. But

maybe the one second before the flush—ah! She looks and sees the horse galloping its way down into the depths.

Monet's eyeball?

Saw light.

An aerial view of the coastline?

The Griffith Observatory here in L.A. is closing for three years for massive renovations. So I went with some friends to the Planetary show. Big metal structure in the middle, seats with wooden neck rests so you can see the domed ceiling. And they had a big photo (many big photos) of the earth, with its aerial views of coastlines. It is remarkably beautiful. And they talked about how we take our oceans for granted and how imperative they are. The aerial view always looks a bit like lace, too. Someone once reminded me that when you're standing in the foam, you're at the edge of a continent. I'm not sure where I'm going with this one so I'm going to stop here.

The imploding lightbulb?

Apparently, according to a scientist friend of mine, Dan, every lightbulb has its own lifespan, and you can't know it just by looking at it. That you could possibly buy a lightbulb that had an endless life, or a two second life. I need to confirm the details of this with him, but it seems to fly in the face of product-making, in a really lovely way. So whether or not they implode seems to be so highly unpredictable. Which leads nicely to the next phrase.

What about sinning?

What about it. What a good question that is. What about sinning and what about not sinning? Who implodes when and where and why? If sinning is explosive, what do you call the implosive? Inner sinning? Sinning? I guess you could probably learn a whole lot about a person if you asked them to define for you the biggest sin. Or the top five. Because they're probably spending a

ton of energy trying not to do those. But of course it'll vary with each person.

Formaldehyde?

I'm teaching a lot of science majors right now, a GE requirement at USC, a class I made up on Classic and Contemporary Fairy Tales. They come in from the formaldehyde lab to the Grimm brothers and the chopping off of stepsisters' heels and toes. It's puzzling to me, how to reach them. Of course I've only had two classes now but I want to try to teach reading without boiling things down to themes. It's so tempting to do that, and I'm imagining that science majors in particular are going to want clarity even more than usual, but I want to try to maintain some kind of core mystery in the stories. So this is something I'm wrestling with. I guess formaldehyde is also appropriate because when books are boiled down into clear cut themes or summaries, I feel that they become corpse-like, filled with fluids, easy to dispose of. But what's hard is that if I dispose of "man v. man" and "man v. the environment" type stuff, and try to talk about a story otherwise, I often feel distinctly un verbal. A friend of mine, Miranda, was talking about this lecture she went to on psychoanalysis. I wanted her to tell me about it but she said it was hard, that in a way she'd swallowed the concepts whole, and she would only learn and understand them in an articulate way when she had to defend them against people who disagreed. But they existed in her, not quite in words yet. She just had taken them in fully. I feel like that so often with books that I really love; I both want to notice the craft and the work behind it, but also I don't. Something has been swallowed whole, and I understand it best that way. It's the deepest kind of learning. This is a large part of the joy of reading for me. It's something to aim for as a writer, and it's just a difficulty as a teacher. A challenge.

That burning smell?

is bothering me. Please blow out the candle.