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Interview with Aimee Bender

Jane St. John

Aimee Bender

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Aimee Bender is the author of two acclaimed short-story collections, *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* and the more recent *Willful Creatures*, as well as the novel *An Invisible Sign of My Own*. In mid-March she ventured to Missoula from the University of Southern California to be the University of Montana’s visiting prose writer. Between workshops, she joined CutBank reader Jane St. John at the Union Club for a beer (her first Montana pitcher) and a chat.

**Jane St. John:** How you respond to classifications like “wacky” and “magical” that tend to be used to describe your work? Do you get sick of them?

**Aimee Bender:** I generally don’t mind those classifications. Some feel truer than others. I don’t take them that seriously either, because there’s no consensus opinion. There does seem to be a general consensus that it’s not straightforward realism, which I think is true, but what something then becomes is harder to pinpoint. “Wacky” is okay. I think sometimes “clever” is troubling, so I don’t love that one. I don’t love the ones that feel like there’s a little bit of a diminishing quality to them, but generally I don’t feel that.

**JS:** You’ve been quoted as saying that you had a really positive experience at UC Irvine and that you don’t really think that MFA programs have to put writers in boxes or have to necessarily churn out
a bunch of “workshop stories”. But were there moments in workshop where someone would suggest, “what you need is a really clearly defined secondary character and a bunch of scenes where all this unfolds”? And if so, how did you stick to your guns? What gave you the confidence to keep doing what you’re doing?

Aimee Bender: People did say that, and they had said that in other workshops I’d taken and they say it now in classes that I teach, so I think you cannot avoid those kind of comments no matter how rigorously I set up a classroom to say that it’s not helpful if someone just says that they don’t like a type of story. There are usually one or two people [in workshop] who will still say “yeah, I just think I like funny stories and this story is too serious.” When people say that to me, I guess one of the advantages of Irvine was that the people that I trusted were not saying that. They were actually looking at the work in a way that was giving me a lot of permission and hope that I could write the way I wanted to. So when someone would come out with some comment about adding in something I didn’t see how I could add in, it was a little bit easier to push those aside.

One thing I found is that there were some people in class that were incredibly articulate and smart and could voice a wonderful thesis about anyone’s work in the circle, and it would sound very convincing. I felt this, and a friend felt this, where we would just ponder someone’s comments for months, but it wasn’t right. It took about six months to come at the other side of ten rewrites trying to incorporate this person’s point of view, and then to realize that he was very articulate but actually off base. So I think that’s one of the tricky parts of workshop, that so much feels to me about an intuitive sense of what a story needs, as versus an intellectual sense. Someone could say a
comment that's actually quite muddy, but it hits the mark more than that beautiful essay spoken by someone else.

**JS:** Sometimes it's kind of about sifting through the articulations of your peers to really find your good readers, versus the good speakers in workshop?

**Aimee Bender:** Yes, and the good readers can surprise you, and you may not like their work. You can't tell. You might not like another person, but they might still get what you're doing. It's nice if you happen to like them as a person because then you can keep them after grad school, which is also a plus. But I think my general gauge has been if I feel busted by something someone says, that's a good marker that it's true. If I have no idea what they're talking about, and it sounds interesting but I've never even considered it, then I don't know what to do with that anyway and I kind of let those fly by. I maybe have a delight in letting go of certain comments that feel very workshoppy, like, "I don't care about the point of view. Fuck point of view."

**JS:** What do you consider to be a "workshop story"?

**Aimee Bender:** I don't generally see that there is a cookie cutter workshop story. I think it's more of a fear than a real thing. I think the danger of the workshop story is that the symbols are carefully placed and resurface at carefully placed secondary moments, and it's a certain page length, and it has a title that reflects a moment. It just feels careful in a certain way; it doesn't feel messy. I think there's a huge place, particularly in American fiction, for messy stories. I think Americans write the tidiest stories in the world, and there's a great
thing about that, but there's a lot more space than any of us think for the story to sprawl and reference an image that's never been referenced in any other part of the story and end abruptly and all that.

**JS:** What kind of a discussion do you like to facilitate in workshop? What's your workshop philosophy when you teach?

**Aimee Bender:** There are a few parts. One of the things at Irvine that Judith Grossman and Geoffrey Wolff both espoused was this idea of being particular and not shoving your aesthetic on someone else. And it's so hard, because it's a primal act of empathy to try to get out of your own reader mindset and know that your classmates may publish books you'll never buy, because they're not what you would read on your own time. You're still around a table with them and you're obligated to try to see what they're doing, and try to get them to do what they want to do as opposed to what you want to do. I take that with me to my own workshops and I think it does feel more productive, because it can slip out of hand very quickly and become everyone projecting their own writership on that writer's story, and it rarely helps. I think if we're in there nudging the writer toward where the story actually is, trying to find out where the story is and push them toward that, then it's kind of exciting. I think ideally the writer comes in open to that too, so the better people get at writing, the more fixed they can feel in terms of what they think their writing is supposed to be. So that balance is important, of both feeling more confident but also open to really pushing themselves too.

**JS:** I find it really interesting that you suggest that the place where the language is most solid in the story, that's where the story needs to go.
How do you keep the focus on the language in workshop?

**Aimee Bender:** I think both plot and character are going to be reflected in the ways they’re approached in language, and so you can feel when a story is more interesting and active in the language. It doesn’t mean that it’s fancy or in any way complicated, just that the writer’s engaged. You can feel the writer’s engagement. It’s the same with character; when the character feels carefully constructed, I think the character is false on the page. When someone has just let the character go and there’s a person being built, then that’s an interesting character who will then do things, who will then create plot. So some of it is just about really focusing on which parts of the story are strongest and then trying to point out which parts of the story aren’t so strong.

This is the tricky part; this is my ultimate thing that I hope to impart as a teacher. It would be my hope that you start to understand when you’re doing the better work, and when you’re not. If you look at the part where the language is better, and can note for yourself, “oh, I was really spaced out when I wrote that,” or “I was incredibly engaged when I wrote that,” or “I hated writing that part,” whatever it is for that writer because it varies, then that’s the thing to try to replicate, versus the other state of mind, which for me is the kind of gritting my teeth and trying to make the story work. I know when I’m in that mode, even if I think the story’s working, it’s not. It just can’t be. I would hope that you can kind of see a light bulb over the writer’s head and they can say, “oh. I can’t believe the class liked that paragraph. I thought that paragraph wasn’t important.” If they do, then that teaches them something about their own work. I think that’s part of looking at the language, and I think it’s clear usually where it’s stronger and where it’s not.
JS: You mentioned that you’re really fond of magical realists; in interviews you’ve mentioned Calvino, Marquez, Murakami, and you’ve also commented on comic books and the resurgence of sequential art. Do you see those two genres as being part of a similar aesthetic function?

Aimee Bender: I see them as linked. Maybe comic books have been holding that space of more magical fiction for a while as the underdog, but in terms of a similar aesthetic space, it’s hard to say because it is different. The process of reading a comic book is different from reading a book of fiction. I love reading comic books, but having the pictures is different, and having the panels and the changing of size in the panels, it all changes the experience a lot. But I think there is a superhero thing that feels really grounded in the world of comics and may be a particular American kind of magical realism. You see a lot of magical realism in other countries, just so much more common than it has been here, except for comic books and Poe and Hawthorne and some others. There’s been plenty here, in lots of ways, but there’s just a lot of gritty American realism too. There’s a real premium on that, so maybe the superhero breaks out of that.

JS: With the renewed interest in that in American pop culture — the movie versions of comic books, etc. — do you see that maybe Americans are getting more interested in that kind of figurative storytelling, in making metaphors physical? Do you think maybe literature might move further in that direction in America now that that’s become so much in the public consciousness?
**Aimee Bender:** I don’t totally know, because I think movies have been doing that. There’s been more space for a kind of fantastical storytelling in movies and even TV than there has necessarily been in literary fiction. So I think that’s part of why it was so split in my mind, like it couldn’t be literary fiction if people floated, then it would somehow be different. And it’s true that there’s a huge boom right now, but *Superman* the movie came out when I was a kid. I remember seeing it; I loved it loved it loved it and it was a huge hit, and I remember Wonder Woman on TV, and so they were all everywhere. That was the seventies, and probably the sixties... I do think it’s a good time right now for — I call it the Carver swing back for literary fiction. The nineties were super Carver-influenced, there was a lot of realistic minimalism, a lot of Richard Ford influence. I think right now there’s a lot of kind of hyper-realistic stuff, and magic realism, and weird absurdism, and it feels like a very eclectic group of things. I like that because I feel more at home in that kind of messiness. I love Carver, but that’s where I think I had this idea that everyone had to write like Carver or it didn’t count. I think that was the way for a while.

**JS:** In dealing with the publishing industry, do you find yourself getting fueled by butting up against other aesthetics?

**Aimee Bender:** I do, and in some ways it comes from teaching where I feel it’s about me providing a role model for students about that, because the students have very fixed notions of what they think a story can be, and I get to be in front of the class saying I don’t agree. I get the extra authority because I’m in the front of the class, so they can take it or leave it, but I like having that authority. I like that being
published has offered me a bully pulpit to say, “there’s more space than you think.” That’s a nice, unexpected plus. It’s true that if I say, “I’m published,” people will listen to me differently, but all I want to say is the same stuff I would’ve said before, which is I think it’s too rigid.

But the other thing I would say is there’s a big-man-and-little-man story in *Willful Creatures* called “The End of the Line.” My agent was sending it around, and he sent it to a place that said they liked the story but they thought the choice to make it a big man and a little man seemed arbitrary. It was a really weird comment, but it was the same kind of fuel, where I stomped around in my head for a while just saying, “what does that mean?” What’s the assumption in that? Is the assumption that fiction isn’t arbitrary if you make people the same size? That an imaginative choice somehow has to be justified in some other way, beyond just that it made sense and it was how I wanted to tell the story, that it can’t just exist for its own sake? I mean if it doesn’t work, fine, but if they thought the story works but that’s the question, then I feel like that question doesn’t make sense to me and just feels so rigid. So I do get fuel. I get really mad about it a lot. Because the truth is, whenever anyone’s teaching you about fiction they are teaching you a value system about how they look at the world, so it’s personal.

**JS:** The internet offers a lot of possibilities for new kinds of sequential art, or different mixes of the verbal and the visual — you’ve posted on your website a collaboration that involves the text of your story, “Hotel Rot,” combined with sound and animation. What kind of possibilities do you see the internet or other digital technologies offering your specific project?
Aimee Bender: “Hotel Rot” was really fun, because I just love locusnovus.com, the guy does really interesting stuff. That was exciting to me, and I think I get inspired just seeing people take on new forms and try them out in different ways. The internet is boundless that way. I just did a couple collaborations with composers, so that was separate from the internet, but it still just felt good to get out of the world of writers briefly and check in with musicians to see what they’re doing. Robert Coover at Brown is super into hypertext and what you can do on the internet with links and illustrations and all that. I think I do tend to like a more linear story instead of choosing where it goes. I don’t like the multiple possibilities for my own stuff; it makes me anxious. I appreciate hypertext novels, but it’s a doubtful move for me. I like the idea that you can still have a linear storyline on the internet and just use the screen in really compelling ways. So it was fun doing the website, fun learning a little about animation that could be done. I think there is a good space for fiction writers there — everyone needs good stories. There are a lot of jokey, punch line-driven sites that don’t have depth, so the fiction writer has a role.

JS: What web comics/cartoons are you into?

Aimee Bender: Lynda Barry is the main one that I just love. I follow her stuff and I think she’s great. My friends have turned me on to Patrick MacDonald, who I think is really good too, though I don’t know if he’s on the web. It’s rare that I’ll kind of follow a comic. I look at Slate’s comics of the week, as a news re-cap, and those are great too. Occasionally I’ll run into an artist who’s doing drawings, and they’re great, just really funny.
JS: Your characters usually have some kind of distinguishing deformity, some internal condition made external. What’s your distinguishing deformity right now? For this week, today, whenever?

Aimee Bender: A giant Um would work. The first thing that comes to mind is me as a kid. I had a shorter leg, so I had to wear a shoe with a lift for my junior high and high school, and I was called, “Big Shoe.” But that’s something I gave up when my growing was done, so it was more crucial then. I think there are probably so many that it’s hard to think of a good one off the top of my head.

JS: I’ve read that your process involves a lot of automatic writing and just letting everything pour out, and a lot of it seems to happen kind of mysteriously for you. Does that make it at all difficult for you when a student asks something like, “how should I write a ‘different’ story?”

Aimee Bender: There are pitfalls in writing any kind of surrealism or magical realism. I think it’s impossible to talk about exactly how something happens, but I do really like talking about what it is around it, what we can talk about around it. Ultimately, I do agree that you cannot teach writing and that writing is essentially mysterious — but there’s a lot that can be loosened up and there are a lot of things to talk about around it, and those are interesting things. I like it because then we’re circling around something of great depth that we can’t really name.

JS: So what might you talk about to get at what’s around the process?
Aimee Bender: Sometimes I’ll talk about writing rituals. I have this very strict thing of writing a couple hours a day; people really like hearing about that. I think it’s helpful to just hear about what the function is of sitting down for two hours, versus sitting down for eight hours, versus sitting down for half an hour. Or to talk about craft, and talk about what makes a scene work, or how you get into the character, or to talk about when the writer does good work, how they are when they’re doing that work. That’s really trying to get as close as possible to saying “do this again,” but we can’t say, “do this again,” because it’s unknowable.

JS: So you might not be able to make the magic happen, but you can at least recognize it when you’re getting close?

Aimee Bender: You can get as close as you can to knowing the circumstances that facilitate that, and that’s exciting. That’s boundlessly interesting to me. I’ve not gotten bored of that part. I would get bored if I was always like, “put the comma inside the quotes when you write dialogue,” and then, “add a gesture!” If that was the whole deal I would hate the job, but I really like it because it’s so odd and fluid.

JS: It’s probably pretty gratifying for you if students do follow the automatic writing prompts and come up with something really interesting, felt or fresh.

Aimee Bender: And they do. When people loosen up, they get better, and that’s so thrilling. It’s so fun particularly to see someone enter a class kind of stiff, and then just get it, and get that they’re stiff and
then just start to have fun. Even if they’re having fun writing about something of great pain, they’re somehow having fun with the pain, and the writing gets so much better. That’s a total joy.

**JS:** What are you excited about right now in literature?

**Aimee Bender:** I like all the trends of strangeness coming out; I’m reading a Kevin Brockmeier book right now and I like his writing a lot. I was reading a lot of botany; I’m liking the botany books.

**JS:** Is that in preparation for a project?

**Aimee Bender:** Not really. Maybe at some point, but so far it hasn’t shown up directly. I think I just like knowing a little more about the plants that I walk around seeing. I was excited about the Amy Hempel collection that came out last year; I think she’s great. I just read David Foster Wallace’s commencement speech in *The Best American Non-Required Reading of 2006*, and it’s beautiful. He’s a really great one too, because he’s provided so much room with all his ways of playing with form and his really sprawling, good-natured sense of intellectual play. It doesn’t feel rigid, and it doesn’t even feel stuffy or inaccessible.

It’s huge to feel like someone bushwhacked part of the trail of literature for you so that you feel like it’s fine to repeat a phrase nine times; that takes a lot of guts. I feel like David Foster Wallace has done that, and that’s exciting to see. I love George Saunders — I think he’s gotten a lot of good, well-deserved credit. I think it’s a really bountiful, good time for fiction. I know the business part is struggling, as it often is, but in terms of writers out there trying to do interesting things, it’s pretty loose. I went on a big Japanese kick, I read books by Banana
Yoshimoto, and those were wonderful too. I thought those would be really bad because she always has really cheesy covers, but they were beautiful, really lovely.

**JS:** So do you think rugged man-fiction is on its way out?

**Aimee Bender:** Probably not, but I can see how it’s difficult when it’s the dominant thing. Whatever’s the dominant thing is hard. It just nudges other things out of the way. If suddenly magic realism shockingly became the dominant form, I’d probably get really irritated by that. I’d say, “Stop that floating. Put people on the ground, walking.” For me it’s just a lot about the space for variety, for not limiting what fiction can be.