INTERVIEW with BRIAN EVENSON

By Matthew Simmons, Setember, 2008

Brian Evenson's work shakes foundations. It shakes the foundations of faith, of language, of genre. It explores the darkest corners, the emptiest landscapes, the most distressing impulses. And, in that Evenson is one of the most impressive stylists working today, it offers a contradiction to readers—it is disturbing but incredibly satisfying.

Evenson is also a heck of a smart guy, and a very careful craftsman who can talk about his process eloquently. After reading a finished draft of Last Days, I sent Evenson some questions by email, and started a discussion of how he gets into his dark, dark places.

SIMMONS: I wanted to start by asking you about your approach to setting. Your work has a really diverse spectrum of settings. *Dark Property* takes place in a seemingly surreal, burned Western landscape—a placeless place. *The Open Curtain*, on the other hand, has a very real setting—Provo, Utah. *Last Days* seems to occur somewhere between those two poles. How do you find the right place on this spectrum?

EVENSON: I think each piece of fiction calls up its own setting. That's something that comes very early in the process for me—I always have a sense of place before I start writing. If it's a specific landscape, it usually is a place that I know well but have some distance from. So, for instance, the Western landscape is something I didn't start to write about until I'd left Utah. And I was only able to write about a very specific place in the West—Provo, Utah, the town I grew up in—once I'd left the town and felt very alienated and distanced from it. Then the writing of the book became a way of recapturing the place and making it my own again. But as I say, a lot of my stories take bits and pieces of places. Many of my stories take place in a more experimental space where you can't identify particular real-world landscapes. The landscape stays minimal or surreal, the focus being on things other than the setting.

SIMMONS: Your minimalist/surrealist landscapes often remind me of Beckett. The setting for *Last Days* seems to play on a variety of levels. There are, I think, really only a couple of places where you mention real-world detail (the make of one of the automobiles is mentioned). Is this primarily "atmospheric"—an attempt to control tone—or is it pacing that concerns you in a story working toward a particular visceral response from the reader?

EVENSON: I do love Beckett's work, and love how he gives you just enough landscape and setting to allow things to happen, with little bits and pieces of things almost becoming iconic, standing in for the grander scheme of things—the single tree on the stage of *Waiting for Godot*, for instance.

Last Days keeps the world of things stripped down. Almost any object that appears is waiting to reveal itself as having a different function than you might think. Lying in the hospital bed, Kline sees every object as something that can be used to reconfigure his world, which remains, throughout the book, exceptionally strange to him. Objects become little islands that both Kline and the reader can cling to, but islands that always threaten to change. For atmospheric reasons, I made a very specific choice to only describe certain things, but to describe them carefully. But primarily the choice was an issue of pacing, trying to establish a certain breathless velocity for the reader to share with Kline.

SIMMONS: I noticed a similar approach to your characters. Every character is known by a single name, for instance, or a single identifying trait.

EVENSON: I'm interested in seeing what happens when we strip the trappings away, in what happens when we take all the props away. We're left with very little indeed. I want my characters to confront each other more directly, and more essentially, than generally is the case in life. Also, I think that if you keep things simple, the readers end up entering into the story and completing it, filling it in, in a way that makes them both involved and implicated.

SIMMONS: I was reading John Clute's little book, *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror*, and he makes a distinction between "terror" and "horror." Terror is the anticipation of the

unexpected, while horror is the sensation felt while the thing is happening. What do you think of that taxonomy?

EVENSON: I'm afraid I don't know Clute's book. The attempt to distinguish between horror and terror is something that goes back at least to the eighteenth-century gothic, when novelist Ann Radcliffe saw terror as something that expands the soul and heightens the faculties, and horror as something that contracts the soul and annihilates them. For Radcliffe, terror is preferable.

What I like about Clute's definition is that it doesn't seem to be a value judgment so much as a description of two different and equally valid modes, both of which I think figure into my work at different moments. I'm very interested in creating a sense of impending dread, but also philosophically very interested in phenomenology and in sensation, how it must be to physically experience the world in a certain way. I'm also very interested in trauma and in how individuals cope with it, partly because I think that tells us a lot about humans in general. That may be the larger umbrella under which both terror and horror function within my work.

SIMMONS: What does an examination of trauma necessitate from a craft standpoint, e.g., when considering where an event should go in a story, and what the tone should be? Do you, say, need to front-load the horror and make the book about the fallout? Double the horror? And is a flat tone a more appropriate way to carry a story forward? Should one watch out for the possibilities of melodrama?

EVENSON: Each story tries to approach it a little differently. But yes, I think that the tone in my work tends to be more restrained, almost as if (at least in some pieces) the characters are in a state of shock and are having a hard time responding fully to what's going on. There's an ethical openness there, a refusal to tell readers what they should think about what they're perceiving. At its best it can create a tension between the reader and the characters, one in which they start to project their responses into the hole left by the flatness of the response. I try to be very precise, to give the readers just enough to let their imaginations do the work: the words are a catalyst to get their imaginations to take a dark inward turn.

SIMMONS: Though the story is linear, it is interrupted constantly. One book in two novellas, each novella in chapters, each chapter in sections broken up by white space. Why break up a narrative in this way?

EVENSON: The two novellas were written at different times, so that sectional break was already there. Also, I think that white space or negative space is something that can be used to amplify suspense or to allow something to resonate or to increase disorientation. Other than that, I think it's partly done in this book because of all the severing/amputation that goes on. The body of the text has been separated into bits and parsed out . . .

SIMMONS: When you finished the first novella, were you aware that there was a second? Would you have been comfortable with it on its own?

EVENSON: The first one was published in a small, limited-edition chapbook by Earthling Press. When I finished the first one, I really wanted to go on with the idea, but couldn't figure out where I could possibly take it. Then two friends of mine who had read the first novella mentioned that Ludwig Wittgenstein's brother Paul had been a one-handed pianist after losing his arm, and things started to fall in place.

SIMMONS: The book is, let's face it, pretty dark. Pretty violent. Pretty grim. Are you ever bothered by your own material? Do you ever edit things because they seem too dark, too disturbing?

EVENSON: It's probably at least as disturbing and harrowing for me to write it as it is for someone to read it. As a reader, I really like work that has an almost palpable impact on me, that changes me in some way. I like stories that continue to eat away at me after I finish them, and I hope my own work is that way. Writing *Last Days* I found myself constantly struggling with the darkness of it, trying to find that balance where it would be dark but still not be gratuitous, and

would still have something meaningful (albeit fairly grim) to say about the struggle to be yourself in the face of a group or of a hostile world. Kline's answer for how to do that (basically by cutting a swath of destruction through the world) leads to him thinking that though he might just barely still be himself, he very well might have stopped being human.I try not to edit things to make them either darker or less dark, but I try to let the story tell me what it wants and needs. I do think very carefully about how each individual scene is working. If it's gratuitous, it gets cut or it changes. If it's doing something for the story, it stays. If it can do something even better by getting darker, then it gets darker. I remember thinking a few times while writing *Last Days*: "Do I really want to go through with this?" The answer turned out to be "No, but the story does," so [I went] ahead with it.

SIMMONS: Let's end this where the book begins, with those verses from the Book of Matthew (a book that I am, for purely narcissistic reasons, familiar with):

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast if from thee . . . And if thy right hand offend thee, cut if off, and cast it from thee . . .

—Matthew 5:29–30

Beyond the way it sets up the conceit that follows and allows you to comment on (and satirize) Biblical literalism, were there other things that attracted you to that passage and that book? It's always seemed to me that, for example, Matthew is a very dark, angry book. It discourages, quite eloquently, feeling any sort of righteous certainty. It seems to discourage all "organized" religious activity. It's also written in a really interesting rhythm—at least in the King James translation. Any thoughts on those observations?

EVENSON: Matthew is my favorite of the four gospels. In the King James translation, Matthew seems to be the gospel that pays the most attention to rhythm, pattern, and sound, the one closest to being a literary object. It's also the gospel that's most Heaven directed, that speaks most about the Kingdom of Heaven and its nature, and it also talks a lot about the second coming. It has a

certain amount of complexity to its understanding of faith, and seems to me to have a darker edge to it, with Jesus a more complicated and moody figure than elsewhere. In it he rails a lot more: “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” It’s very different from, say, the Gospel of John, which has, generally speaking, a more detached and kindly feel to it, and which seems to take the “longer” view.I hadn’t thought about it, but I guess *Last Days* begins with a quotation from Matthew and then ends with an apocalypse. Which would suggest that it starts with the first book of the Bible and then ends with reference to the last, the Book of Revelation. That’s all complexified by all sorts of other things going on with books or Mormon scripture and other religious subtexts, but it’s interesting to think of it as a kind of dark double of the Bible . . .