

The Story Behind "The Program in Profound Thought"

"The Program in Profound Thought" was the first short story I wrote after completing my novel *Girls I Know*, which follows the lives of three characters in the aftermath of a fictitious restaurant shooting. My first book, *The Thin Tear In the Fabric of Space*, is comprised of stories that orbit around experiences of grief and loss. Taken together, I think it's safe to say that these books are saturated with melancholia, although there is humor and lightheartedness in both works here and there. In hindsight, I realize that my thirties began with my sister dying unexpectedly and ended with me getting divorced, so maybe the roots for such melancholia aren't that hard to uncover.

In part because I wanted to change my objectives as a writer, and in part because I thought it would be fun, I decided in the wake of *Girls I Know* to write a collection of stories comprised of lighter fare than what I had written in the past. In the throes of my divorce, I had a number of people tell me that the experience was like grieving the death of a loved one. I accepted this analogy for about a year, until I realized that actually—although absolutely gut-wrenching—my divorce had a comedic/absurdist quality to it. Divorce is of course as much about rebirth as it is death—more so, it seems to me—and I decided that I wanted to write about what such rebirth might look like in fictionalized form.

I have never written a short story that doesn't come from several places at once. Otherwise the narrative feels too linear, too neat, for me to feel absorbed by it. As much as "Program" focuses on its main character, Herbert Baker, a divorcé struggling through a midlife crisis, it is also a parodic account of teaching at a

Midwestern university—of feeling burned-out by such teaching (I made Herbie more than a decade older than I am in part to try to more easily account for why he would feel so burned-out in the first place), and of feeling disconnected from the increasing corporatization of academic culture. Herbert's phony lecture series is a not-very-subtle sendup of interdisciplinarity—which is predicated on the notion that scholars from different fields have things to learn from one another. I believe that this is largely true, and I have benefited personally from interdisciplinary programs and funding, but I have also seen scholars like Herbert Baker—who is in a lasting, demoralizing intellectual rut—express feeling demeaned by such newfangledness, and I wanted to write about how such feelings might manifest themselves in both comic and serious forms.

The last essential ingredient for "Program," in my mind, was Herbie's brother, Pete. I wanted there to be a reason for Herbie to defraud Excellence University that would make him sympathetic to the reader, otherwise he might just come across in the story as a crook, and I wanted someone in the story who could make light of Herbert's predicament. A lot of writing short fiction entails trying to kill multiple birds with as few stones as possible, and when I started playing around with Pete's voice I had a ball, particularly when I remembered some of the one-liners a friend of mine who had gone through rehab had repeated again and again during the early years of his recovery. Herbie's house, with its woodpile and raccoons, is based on the last home in which I lived in Iowa City before moving to Ann Arbor, and some of the description of the unnamed town in the story closely parallels Iowa City, although to equate the University of Iowa with Excellence

University wouldn't be fair to the former. I think every American university risks becoming like Excellence, and every academic risks becoming like Herbert. I would love to attend an academic lecture like the one that occurs at the end of the story, although that would be unlikely—I think it's safe to say—just about anywhere.

"The Program in Profound Thought" was a joy to write and set the tone for the collection of stories I am just now finishing up. I'm so thrilled the *Notre Dame Review* was willing to publish the story, and I hope you enjoy reading it.

Douglas Trevor