by Parks Kugle

In Conversation With David Hollander

David Hollander frequently breaks conventional structures while pushing the boundaries of form and style. His work originates from the philosophical possibilities of the imagination. David's book *Anthropica*, forthcoming in 2020, contains an array of characters and settings, each positioned against an impending apocalypse. In this interview, Parks Kugle—former managing editor of *Lumina*—sits down with Hollander to discuss *Anthropica*, writing, and experimentalism.

David Hollander is also the author of the novel L.I.E., which is a nominee for the NYPL Young Lions Award. His short stories have been published in *McSweeney's*, *Fence*, *Conjunctions*, *The Rumpus*, *Juked*, and *Black Warrior Review,* among other publications.

This interview has been edited for time and clarity.

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Parks Kugle: Why fiction, and not poetry or nonfiction?

David Hollander: I don't think I understand the dividing lines very well. I know that much of what I value in fiction (language, structure, voice) is often associated with poetry. I also know that my entryway to fiction was not my reading of fiction, but my reading of philosophy and literary theory, which, of course, fall under the broad umbrella of nonfiction.

I find myself thinking of Nabokov's description of the three possible roles for the novelist: storyteller, teacher, or enchanter. I'm interested in the final two roles much more than I am in the first, so my fiction isn't very… fiction-y, I guess. A thought-provoking line of poetry, or the machine-perfect syntax of an excellent academic essay—both make me happier than many fictional stories do.

PK: How can a novelist be an enchanter?

DH: That's an interesting question. I think that most novels operate according to the same set of rules, values, and logic that we experience and rely on every day. But some novelists are in the business of creating an ulterior logic. If a reader is convinced by this logic, an enchantment has taken place.

A book like Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, for instance, features an adolescent protagonist who is both an artistically-tempered young boy and a little red monster. He's both an object in an epic and a subject in a novel. He's both of the past and of the present. The book has countless conceptual twists and flares, but, somehow, you believe it all. The book teaches you how to read the book. Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is an enchantment. So is Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Of course, Carson is also a kickass storyteller when she wants to be. And Calvino is a teacher of sorts.

So, as in our previous exchange about genre, we see that the lines blur.

PK: I'm glad you've returned to the question of genre. Given the kinds of cross-pollination you're discussing, how does writing relate to your music?

DH: I'm not sure that it does. I'm an amateur musician at best.

PK: I've heard you play.

DH: Well, good, we're on the same page. I'm not sure that there's any connection at all. I know that I hear prose as music. But is there a correlation between what it feels like to write a pleasing sentence and what it feels like to improvise over some chords?
PK: Is there?
DH: Shhh. I'm thinking. Maybe my attraction to dissonance—which I find very beautiful—crosses this divide? When I read a John Hawkes novel, or a Clarice Lispector novel, there's a feeling of wrongness that pervades every sentence. I have to keep asking myself, "Am I reading this correctly?" I love that feeling. And in music I'm drawn to a lot of the sounds that people think of as the "wrong" sounds. As mistakes. Flat fifths, minor seconds, et cetera. To me, when arranged properly, these dissonant combinations seem to brush the circuits in my brain attuned to the divine…they activate or exacerbate this feeling I have that there's something I'm not getting, and am unable to get. Something just beneath or behind the veil of everyday lived experience.
Or maybe that's the kind of bullshit thing a person says when trying to answer an unexpected question in an interview.
PK: When did you first encounter experimentalism, and how has it shaped your work? What were you writing before?
DH: Ahh, you want my "origin story." Okay.
I took a course with Rick Moody when I was an undergraduate. At that time, my exposure to literature had been limited to the science fiction I'd devoured as a boy on Long Island (hiding in my bedroom lest my father realize I was reading), and the 19th century novels I'd consumed as a curious and eager college student. But Rick came from the "experimental" or "postmodern" school of writing. I didn't know that fiction could do some of the things I saw it doing in the work he brought to the table. He had me read Robert Coover, for example, and Angela Carter, and Barthelme, and Hawkes. I remember Moody directing me toward Coover's miniature masterpiece, "The Babysitter," which blew my mind. It's a story that dispenses with all the usual reverence (for character, for plot, for reverence itself), and replaces it with a quantum form of organization that rips the fictional universe to shreds. The bewilderment I felt upon first encountering that story—which is "anti-realist" down to its core—matched, for me, what it really feels like to move through this world.
What I began to realize, as a 23-year-old college student, was that it was possible for fiction to address all of the issues that had drawn me to philosophy, and to do it with teeth bared. Kant's replacement of objective truth with subjective truth, Wittgenstein's talk of a "picture that holds us captive," Derrida's "hierarchies in violent opposition"… these are actually felt in certain varieties of so-called "experimental fiction." The beginning of my fiction-writing career, such as it is, can be dated to the discovery of these works. Though I suppose I had written some science fiction-y stuff prior to that. We'll have to check the fossil records for evidence.
PK: Many authors profess their love of plot, and that, in fact, they derive energy from it. Does plot play a significant role in your work?
DH: A plot is where you bury the body.
PK: That's clever.
DH: I stole it from Ben Marcus. But listen, I really like plot. Well-plotted novels astound me. Have you ever read David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*?
PK: Yes.

DH: I think of that book as a masterpiece. But the section that is most miraculous to me is the one written like a detective novel, the Luisa Rey section. Or, to be more lowbrow, a film like *The Usual Suspects* blows my mind. The plot mechanics. The obfuscation and revelation.

The problem is that I have no talent for it. I don't think in terms of plot. In fact, the few times I've tried to write plot-driven fiction, the results have been total shit. I can't stay out of my own way. I'll try to write a sentence about someone walking to his car, and somehow it turns into a disquisition on the nature of entropy. Since I have so much trouble simply leaving the world as it is, I can't really write plot-driven fiction.

PK: "Leaving the world as it is"?

DH: I mean that the minute you start to turn stones over, you find all sorts of shit you didn't know was there. It speaks to Ballard's idea that a novelist has to "invent reality." A story in which a man walks to his car includes within itself a hundred million other stories. So, what is our responsibility to all of those other stories?

How comfortable are we with the lie that this story, in which a man goes to his car, drives to the facility where his sick mother is slowly disappearing into her dementia, takes a phone call from the woman he's in love with, thinks about when he sat beside his mother on a piano bench as a little boy (she, it turns out, was a music teacher), walks to the window and sees a dirty seagull picking trash from a dumpster outside the facility's hangar-like garage, where large vans with tinted windows are parked perpetually in symmetrical columns (note all the potential metaphors available to the reader here)… How comfortable are we with the lie that this story is THE story?

My thing is, I'm not comfortable. I can't stand it. I've gotta get to the next level. I can't just make decisions on the page. I have to explore them, see them in the context of the unmade decisions, et cetera.

PK: Deep.

DH: Yes, but is it romantic?

PK: All of your stories are different from each other. They range from Long Island, robots before juries, a coach giving a speech to America, reinterpretations of *Where the Wild Things Are*, and the list goes on. Do you have a favorite setting, time, or fictional space?

DH: No, I don't think so. My whole process is a little bit different every time I write a story. I haven't written one in quite a while. But I'm often interested in "borrowing" a setting, or time, or fictional space and somehow flipping the content you expect to find there. It's a way of exposing untruths or imposing a counter-narrative on what seems to be a "fixed" or sacred narrative. The story with the "robot before the jury" is, for me, a very funny piece in which the idea that consciousness is an elegant form of ascendancy—an idea that is a sort of foundational science fiction trope—is flipped. My protagonist has ascended to non-sentience, been liberated *from* consciousness. The reason that my stories take many different forms is that I find many different cultural "truths" completely absurd, and I can't help but poke at them.

PK: In your novel, and in several of your short stories, you write from the perspective of robots. So, I have to ask, why robots?

DH: You like the robots.

PK: Is it obvious?

DH: I like them too. Seeing the world from the point of view of a robot allows you to experience the strangeness in all of the things we take for granted.
I get up in the morning and I'm completely useless until I brew and consume large quantities of coffee. That's normal for a lot of us. But a robot, or a Hollander-generated robot, would be very curious about this odd human need to filter hot water through a coarse brown dust so as to imbibe a life-elixir that is presumably stored within some internal hull-cavity, and which activates the "Will To Live," without which, functionality is seriously compromised.
You can perform this operation with small human activities but also with big political ideas and assumed social truths. Given that my agenda is often to reveal absurdity and hypocrisy and fallacious reasoning, there's no better tool than a robot.
PK: Speaking of robots, what's this about "Fexo the robot" tweeting toward your destruction?
DH: Fexo. Jesus. So okay, there's this whole thing going on where there's someone (or maybe something) operating a Twitter account under the name "The Great and Powerful Fexo." People think that I'm actually Fexo, that I'm running this account, but I am not. It's some stupid joke, and I'm trying to get to the bottom of it. But The Great and Powerful Fexo seems to be a robot pretending to be a human, or else a human pretending to be a robot pretending to be a human. Fexo keeps telling anyone who'll listen that he is the author of *Anthropica*. He calls me "Hollander-unit" and makes vague threats. He posts shit on my website, longlivetheauthor.com.
I feel like the entire charade is karmic retribution for my co-optation of robots in my writing and on my website.
PK: I've been down the rabbit hole that is longlivetheauthor.com. What brought about its Choose Your Own Adventure construction?
DH: As is often the case, I'm just reacting with the website to something I find really phony. In this case, the entire milieu of author websites. I wanted to make an anti-website. No one can even find it, since my name does not appear on any of its pages. But I do think it's funny.
PK: *Anthropica* will be released in the spring of 2020. You chose Dead Rabbits Publishing, a small press, for its release. Do you feel that smaller presses offer more freedom?
DH: Yes. And for the record, *Anthropica* is being published by a small press for that reason alone, and not because it was rejected by every major publishing house and a number of other small presses before Dead Rabbits Publishing was crazy enough to take it on. But I have to say, it's been fantastic, so far, to work with this publisher. They've given me real feedback, provided a detailed publishing schedule, and showed in all sorts of ways that they're legitimately behind my book. None of that happened when I published with Random House back at the onset of our new century. But the reality is that Dead Rabbits chose me, not the other way around, and I'm grateful.
PK: *Anthropica* features a large cast and plot. Do the character plotlines affect one another or is the story more thematically linked?
DH: I see. The thing I seem to love most as a reader is making connections. Say you come across something on page 28, and it doesn't make a lot of sense to you because you have no way to contextualize it. Then, later, you come across something on page 114 and you're like, "That's what that thing on page 28 was!"

What I am trying to do in *Anthropica* is provide that feeling as often as I can. New characters, storylines, and ideas are frequently introduced in a way that probably seems random, but if the reader goes forward, they'll eventually see how it all links together. Everything hooks into something else. The trick is to give the reader this thrill of connection while also suggesting that there are (many) more connections to be made. Reading the book is the process of moving toward a kind of harmonic convergence that may or may not come. Does that make sense?

PK: Yes, it sounds like swells hitting a cliff-face. I've read some of the descriptions of the book on your publisher's website. Robots (again, robots!) who hide away in a subterranean bunker, religious mole people, a nihilistic novelist seeking tenure, a Hungarian fatalist, a former philosophy professor with ALS who realizes he can make things happen by wanting them enough, a factory of human heads being mined for information, and an Ultimate Frisbee-playing man-child who discovers a fractal pattern contained within all matter...these are just a few of the book's competing storylines. It sounds complicated. What was your process in creating these characters and their worlds?

DH: Process… process… I'm not sure. I mean, the book took a long time to write. I can't really remember how it happened. At first I was writing what I called a "g-chat" novel, where I would post little snippets of text in the status box of my gmail account for friends and frequent correspondents to see. I liked the idea that there was a novel hiding behind a wall and that you could only make out little bits of it through cracks in the bricks. At that point, I was playing around with a few characters and just having a good time riffing on things that interested me. Like, have you ever thought about how much heating oil is being consumed on a cold winter day, in the wintery parts of the United States alone? Or how much salt is being spread on a typical day over frozen roads and French fries?

PK: No.

DH: These are rhetorical questions. I started thinking that it was impossible that there could be enough stuff to sustain our insane rates of consumption. The "Anthropica theory," developed in the book by natural resource scientist Stuart Dregs, is the theory that all of this is only here because we want it to be. Human desire creates the universe. Once I had this crackpot idea, I considered the implication that if "Anthropica" is true, apocalypse is impossible (because we don't want it badly enough, or so I'm assuming). This led to the development of the book's central character, Laszlow Katasztrófa, the Hungarian fatalist, who believes humans are a stain on God's otherwise perfect universe, and whose desire to eradicate the species comes up against the "Anthropica" principle. I started wondering, how could Laszlow succeed? And the idea of a force equal-and-opposite to human desire started to become interesting… a force just as strong that wanted things to end, rather than continue. And so, cue the human-hating superintelligent robots.

This process, whereby things suggested or necessitated other things, seemed to go on for years, as the book grew into the crazy matrix or Mobius strip it has now become. But the way I'm talking about it makes it sound planned out and pseudo-rational. It wasn't rational or logical or anything like that. I felt pretty crazy much of the time. I was often surrounded by diagrams and flowcharts. I finished a draft that was half as long as the current book. I was sure it was finished. It wasn't. I gave up. I went back to it. Gave up

again. Decided to quit writing forever. Went back to it. Had epiphanies. Realized the epiphanies were really stupid. Tried framing the entire book as an interview with Oprah Winfrey. Repented. Et cetera, et cetera.
The book has been enormous fun to write, and I believe in it, but it's not a tidy or polite text. And any time I talk about my process, I feel like I'm just making stuff up. Somehow the book happened. I don't know how or why. I barely feel like I wrote it at all.
PK: Do you have any parting words?
DH: Yes. I do.
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Learn more about David Hollander's work on his anti-website.
Learn more about "The Great and Powerful Fexo" on Twitter.
Learn more about Dead Rabbit Books on their website.

Parks Kugle has lived in Austin and New Orleans, where he has worked for media companies and nonprofits. He was a Teaching Assistant at The Writer's Hotel in 2017, 2018, and 2019, and is the former managing editor of *Lumina*. His story "Married Swine" was featured in *Flash Fiction Magazine*.