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Oversoul



Aside from his day job teaching writing at NYU, [Mitchell S. Jackson](#) interviews hip-hop royalty for SMOOTH Magazine and is the subject of a documentary that also includes “Freeway” Rick Ross (the original Rick Ross) and literary great John Edgar Wideman. I’m not sure I remember my college professors ever being so cool. Last month, Mitchell released his first book, a collection of essays and stories titled *Oversoul*. In it are great examples of the range of his work, from personal accounts about the duality of the drug-trade to an essay he wrote about his mentor John Edgar Wideman which was originally published in the first print issue of Dossier. Not to stop there, he has an up-coming novel, *The Residue Years* due out in the Spring of 2013 loosely based on his personal experience with both selling drugs and watching them destroy your family.

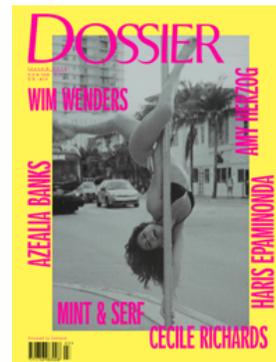
Mitchell is an avid, if not professional reader as much as a writer- you always know he is going to read the book you are talking about if he hasn’t already read it yet (for further proof check out the book recommendations on his website.) Here, I asked him a few questions about his writing process and the points of intersection with reading.

Katherine Krause: How long did it take you to write *Oversoul*?

Mitchell S. Jackson: This book took years to write, but I wasn’t working on it the whole time. I wrote most of these pieces for other publications, but all of them I went back and edited incessantly. From the time I decided to collect them in a book, it took about four or five months to edit.

Katherine: Which piece took the longest or was the hardest to write?

Mitchell: I’d say two essays were the toughest. “Serial Killers” was difficult because it required a risky level of honesty about aspects of my life that might be deemed amoral or at least paranormal. I also knew that people whom I cared for would read it and possibly be hurt, that I stood a strong chance of opening up wounds. On the other hand, I wanted to be honest about telling my truth. If you asked some of them, they might argue for another truth, but I did what I could to maintain a fidelity to my experience as I remembered it. “Matrimony” was tough because I wrote it many years ago—I think it was 2007—and I had the original ending about accepting my mother’s addiction. Then earlier this year she and I shot for my documentary, and I found out the truth about her first experience with hard drugs, which meant I’d pretty much dreamed up the scenario I wrote about in the essay. So then the issue became do I maintain



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my memory of what happened, or do I include the new information? You can see in the coda the decision I made.

Katherine: Which piece was the easiest to write?

Mitchell: “This is What it Means To Say Portland.” I wrote the bulk of that as a ten-minute freewriting exercise with one of my classes. I spent hours and hours and hours editing it, but what was published is essentially what I wrote in class that day.

Katherine: What is the main difference for you between writing fiction and essays? Do you enjoy one more than the other?

Mitchell: Fiction requires more. In fiction you have to be able to create a description rather than just recount what you saw. You have to be able to invent dialogue, rather than scribble something witty you overheard (though sometimes this may happen in fiction too). It’s one thing to describe how something interesting looks in an essay or journalistic piece; it’s another thing to make a person vivid on the page from only your imagination. I enjoy fiction more because it requires the most of me and also gives me the most freedom. I can virtually do anything I imagine. Plus, I get to be the wellspring. I had a mentor tell me that critics could never be considered as equals to artist because they are doomed forevermore to coming after the story. I feel the same way about a journalist/essayist in some respect. When I am writing non fiction, memoir, essay, I am coming after the experience. Also, because there must be a fidelity to what actually (or how I perceived it) occurred, I am restricted in some respects. I love the idea of being an inventor with freedom, all the freedom.

Katherine: Were there any pieces you wrote that didn’t fit that you had to take out?

Mitchell: I write so slow and output so little, I didn’t have to take anything out. I actually questioned whether I should I put more in.

Katherine: Do you have a specific writing process? Any rituals? Weird habits?

Mitchell: As much as I would love to have a ritual, I don’t. As far as process, sometimes I write down isolated sentences and put them on a page and try to include them. Like I’ll have three sentences that I love and feel compelled to fit them in some way. Usually it doesn’t work out. They disrupt the consecution of the sentences, the natural progression, the integrity. Another thing I do is read all of my paragraphs aloud for their acoustic resonance. If the acoustics are off then, no matter the content, the sentence in my mind is flawed. So I either cut it or figure out how to say it so that how I say it excites my ear. Habit-wise, I feel more creative in the morning, so if I have the chance I like to wake up early and write. I also have discovered that ideas come to me in the night, so I keep a Moleskine close by and/or my Blackberry and I send emails to myself titled ‘Notes.’ If I did a search in my email for ‘Notes’ I’d probably find thousands.

Katherine: How much time a day do you spend writing?

Mitchell: When I’m not teaching, which is not often, I can spend eight to ten hours a day everyday writing. When I am teaching, I’m lucky to steal two hours a day a few days a week. I am always taking notes though, and scribbling sentences and ideas, but the time that I am actually sitting down at a computer or writing longhand during the school year doesn’t amount to much.

Katherine: What are you reading right now?

Mitchell: I am pushing my way through Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*. I’m halfway through. In a general sense, I know what’s going on, but I can’t really follow the plot. To boot, I’m terrible with keeping up with character names, so I’m having trouble remembering who is who. But the reason I’m reading it is to hopefully gain some insight into how he creates all those damn voices. Also open on my iPad, among others books, is David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*, which I’m about twenty percent into according to Kindle. A few days ago I reread some stories in Junot Diaz’s *Drown*. It’s really hard to find something I want to read all the way through, so I end up re-reading my favorites and reading new work in fits. I think the last one I went straight through without stopping was Justin Torres’ *We The Animals*. But to be honest, I was reading half because it was a good book—he has a strong voice—but half also because I needed to see what all the hype was about. I’m competitive.

Katherine: You’re stranded on desert island- which five books do you bring?

Mitchell: A collection of James Baldwin’s essays. Junot Diaz’s *Drown*. Denis Johnson’s *Jesus Son*. Barry Hannah’s *Ray*. John Edgar Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers*.

Katherine: Who are some of your favorite writers?

Mitchell: This is in no particular order: Barry Hannah, Amy Hempel, John Edgar Wideman, Jack Glibert, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Junot Diaz, Yusef Komunyakaa, Edward P. Jones, Chuck Palahniuk, James Baldwin.

Katherine: What do you read as a guilty pleasure?

Mitchell: Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*. Though I don’t feel much guilt about it. Dude can write.

Katherine: What’s up with the pictures in the book?

Mitchell: I wanted to do something more than just include prose. I also had these elaborate ideas about interior book design, like *Oversoul* could look like one of those oversized art books. Right, I’m really ambitious. I think it started because I knew I wanted to use the Wideman essay and I didn’t want it to be the only one with a picture. And let me tell you, I anguished for longer than I should on whether to keep or lose the photos altogether.

Katherine: You mention in the book that you are as rare as a spotted owl for escaping the fate that befalls many that grow up where you did. How did you escape?

Mitchell: I didn’t escape, not unscathed at least, so in that sense I’m not that rare. But I think what’s important is not that you get out without getting scraped (which is uncommon around my way), but that you do something positive after the scrape. I think what separated me from some of my peers was the belief that I was better than some of the things with which I was involved. Also, not only did I think it, there was evidence in some of my accomplishments that I could do better. Case in point, I just went through a scrapbook and found a Scholar Athlete Award plaque I won my junior year of high school. The plaque says I had a 4.0 that semester. I am almost certain that year I was also a wannabe drug dealer.

Katherine: Tell me a little something about your forthcoming book..

Mitchell: The book is called *The Residue Years* and it is similar thematically to *Oversoul*. It follows two main characters: a mother who is struggling to resurrect her life after a long battle with drugs and her oldest son who is trying to assist in that resurrection, but also endeavoring in the industry that has dogged them in the first place. Plus, the son is becoming a man. Is there such a thing as a coming-of-manhood story? I am still working through edits on the book, but it is due to my publisher shortly. The problem is, I love

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sentences so much, I'm probably spending too long on that level of revision. I will say this: it's the story I've always felt I had to write. It may also be the last time I touch something in fiction which is so close to my experience. I got concepts too.

This entry was written by Katherine Krause, posted on July 3, 2012 at 12:40 pm, filed under Fiction, Interviews, Nonfiction and tagged John Edgar Wideman, Mitchell S. Jackson, Oversoul, Rick Freeway Ross, The Residue Years. Bookmark the permalink. Follow any comments here with the RSS feed for this post. Post a comment or leave a trackback: Trackback URL.

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