

HAVING IT TOGETHER

A Conversation with Padgett Powell by Jacob White

For twenty-five years now, Padgett Powell's fiction has been coming apart. This is not meant pejoratively. Coming apart is what Powell does, and does better than anyone.

Powell's latest book, *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* (2009), pushes coming apart to its limit—or essence. The book is composed entirely of questions that for the most part have no explicit connection. Yet the book is strangely affecting. Beneath its rich angularities of tone and propulsive non sequiturs stares a two-a.m. sobriety: an intimacy new to Powell's work, or maybe there all along. 2009 also saw the reissue of *Edisto*, which, revisited now, sets aglow something sustained beneath even the most oblique and fractious later fictions, beneath *The Interrogative Mood* especially, which, even as it asks us, "Am I wasting your time? Or are you wasting mine?"¹, proffers a hand: "I think you are with me. I think you and I could dance across this floor of doubt in a cuddly promenade if we could know what our feet are up to"².

The following interview took place in August of 2009, following a short and humiliating lesson on mullet fishing.

Jacob White: As a newish resident of Florida I find the pitbull is rampant here. It is in Florida's blood or something. Every day at the dog park someone arrives with a pitbull and two or three owners leash up and erectly depart. But is this the right response? Do we hold the pitbull against itself?

Padgett Powell: They depart because the pitbull is a fighting dog and their dogs are not. This is to say, their dogs will fight, but the pitbull can fight. The analog would be Roberto Duran's walking fat and drunk into happy hour; we should leave.

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The pitbull at the dog park is a loosely bred facsimile of what it was in the hands of professional dogfighters. It has in this loose breeding a tendency to bite people, which was never allowed under the thoroughbred breeding of professionals, and it is loosely governed in public, which also was never allowed. Like any other dog that becomes popular and falls into inexpert hands, the pitbull is now ruined (put it with collies and beagles, say), with the extra consequence that it is a lethal force. People are right to run.

JW: In your last novel, *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men*, Mrs. Hollingsworth writes to herself, "You will never be allowed to speak on National Public Radio"³, and it does seem that, despite the cultural heft of your work, the humanities people are a little wary of you, or haven't quite fixed you on the cultural syllabus. Has this lack of cultural recognition been a blessing, a frustration, or a source of immeasurable indifference?

Also: Which poses a bigger problem for the South: Ted Turner or NPR?

PP: One of the things a sane boy cannot complain of is want of recognition. Let's face it: it is a function of merit, demerit, and accident. I like to imagine sometimes all the fine actors in the country, in the world, who scrape and scrimp and starve as Tom Cruise rakes it in. Is there any integrity to their whining about that?

NPR is harmless, and I wake up to it every day now, in my senility and wallowing closer to the grave. Ted Turner is my main man. He was Ted Turner, as himself, in my last book, though for bogus legal strictures put upon me he appeared as the misnomered and misleading Roopit Mogul. If you scratch out Roopit Mogul and pencil in Ted Turner, and Jane, there are some scenes that are almost funny, and moments that almost have intelligent import.

I have envisioned recently a new book that begins so: I am Ted Turner. Am I not Ted Turner?

I have been trying to write something since about 1980 that has as its central character a person named Ted Turner and have not been able to do it. I have

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proposed to magazines that I do a profile of him and have not been allowed. How might he pose a “problem for the South”?

JW: How might he not? The Mouth of the South? Is Ted Turner, or mouth, really the appropriate response to what you have termed the South’s whippedness? Does whippedness pertain anymore?

PP: Turner is the antithesis to whippedness. [Somewhere] you averred maybe you had misapprehended Turner, and I believe that you have. Explaining his dissolve with Jane, he said, “She wants me to be a saint. And I’m not.” End of story—no whining, no protracted nasty divorce—he just walked away from the hottest thing there is in our time. After making CNN, he was the man to genetically engineer the New Southerner. Seinfeld could tee off on Steinbrenner, but lawyers at Houghton Mifflin wouldn’t let me play with Ted and Jane. Would Steinbrenner sue Seinfeld? No. Would Turner sue me? No.

He is a hero, truly, if there is one. Listen to him talk. “Hi, Kofie,” he says, when he meets Kofie Anan and gives him \$1B (which he subsequently can’t deliver owing to financial ruin).

JW: *The Interrogative Mood* will be the fifth novel in a body of writing that has worked steadily to loose itself from novelistic obligations. Over the years, and especially over the last decade, you seem to have crossed a point where conventional narrative is no longer an option. Can you explain this?

PP: Yes. No. The urge to commit verisimilitude has been exhausted. I thought fiction was strictly realist to-be-believed until I met Donald Barthelme, who lamented that he found me “fully formed.” The effect of seeing fiction not-to-be-believed, and unframed conventionally, was very powerful upon a boy almost thirty. I was not fully formed. I drifted hard toward what Barthelme himself, sane, was quitting at about that point. I said goodbye to Flannery O, William F, Tennessee W, hello to Don B and Samuel B.

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JW: The good many short pieces that you have set loose over the last decade—dialogs, monologues, sketches about shirts of meat—seem indeed to forswear the large utterance, gathering instead toward a consideration of *Not Having It Together*: “I am sitting here without my marbles together, envying other people sitting where they are sitting with their marbles together”⁴. Is there a nobility to be found in this condition? Or in acknowledging it?

PP: I doubt it. We will recall O’Connor’s famous little ditty in I believe her preface to *Wise Blood* on its tenth birthday: integrity obtains in what one is unable to do? Haze Motes had integrity since he could not repudiate Jesus try as he might have? Was that it? In my case I have come, whether via writing or not, to see that I am a coward. That is the condition well beneath a rather trivial condition of “failing,” I think.

JW: A coward how?

PP: A coward in all ways. Typically a fundamental coward is not afraid of the putative cowardice-betraying things, like physical danger. Those things are cosmetic cowardice. In deep cowardice you are afraid of life itself, and you learn to wear a coat of bluster and cheer that hides the fear.

JW: How does one discover, “via writing,” that one is a coward? How does one not?

PP: The discovery is not I think via writing, though the position that one cannot not find himself via writing is of course a happy (and phony) bromide. The discovery is just in sitting there and realizing you are afraid of everything, and that some people are not, whether through the natural bluster of dogs or through a more noble actual heroism and game. Many women seem to have this natural game. I prefer to hide and run.



JW: Is it true that you have retired from teaching to raise chickens?

PP: I still purport to teach, and by dint of my record in chickens so far it is even fair to say I am a better teacher than chicken man. I have bought so far 35 chickens and not raised one to egg-laying age, about 24 weeks. Raising writers I have many who have laid some very good eggs.

JW: Barthelme often mentioned Beckett as a “problem” for him as a writer, due to the power of Beckett’s style, which Barthelme felt he had to free himself from, or somehow get around. Of course Barthelme was himself a powerful stylist, and I wonder what you, as a student of his, might say to writers who find your own style similarly powerful and therefore similarly worrisome.

PP: It’s the worrisome I would address. I read as a child certain writers with worry (Faulkner) and without worry but with great frequency (or volume) (Mailer). I got to where I read an author until I had the score: his tricks, his obsessions, his game. As I matured I got better at this and when I had the score I got impatient more quickly than I earlier had and repudiated them more thoroughly. Thus what I think I am saying is I think loving a guy is all right because at a point it will effect an allergy and you will reject the affection (and any inclination to mimic overtly) and keep whatever was truly useful to you (which ideally will be some covert thing). All these cases are different: with Faulkner I thought if I read another book (beyond about five) I would actually succumb to him as I think you can argue Cormac M did, so I stopped, and then I developed the allergy, and today I can’t read him without impatience at the hokeyness of it. Mailer I read as a teenager wanting to be Mailer; easy to quit that. Tennessee Williams somewhat the same, but since he lost his mind and kept writing you can actually keep reading him and liking him as he goes crazy and his tricks consume him. Similar case is Hemingway: he nuts up so bad at the end that you can see all over how and why he was good when he was

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good. Walker Percy got consumed by his tricks very steadily and predictably and dully. O'Connor was a constant except for the immature thesis work.

The only trouble I suffered in reading to steal was Barthelme, whom I came to very late and whom I did not (have not) read that much of. There was the matter of his personal influence on me that complicated the allergy-making and I became some kind of illegitimate son, I'm afraid. But this did not come from reading and liking the reading or not liking it.

All this boils down to this: read, like it, reread it, worship it, mimic it, believe in it, live by it, whatever you want to do, and then you will quit all that and write something you are not impatient with until you begin to develop a vision of your own tricks and develop an allergy to yourself, which is another chapter.

End of forgoing. (O'Brien, Flann, Two-Birds)

JW: The mullet is widely regarded as a trash fish, yet you have declared mullet the best eating river fish since catfish. By what preparation is this fish best redeemed?

PP: Low whites like to call mullet a trash fish. It is best fried or smoked. Sometimes it has a dirt taste, sometimes a clean taste; I do not know how to defeat the dirt taste if you run into it but I suspect there are people who do know. You see more white people fishing for them now than you once did. "The economy."

JW: The recipe?

PP: Just split your mullet from the back, leaving the belly intact, open it up, clean it, lay on the Lusty Monk Burn In Hell chipotle mustard, and smoke that fish.

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ENDNOTES

1. Padgett Powell, *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* (New York: Ecco, 2009), 129.
2. "Dizzy," *Unsaid* 1, http://www.unsaidmagazine.com/magazine/issue1/powell_dizzy.html.
3. *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 31.
4. "Marbles," *Narrative Magazine* (Winter 2006), <http://www.narrativemagazine.com/issues/winter-2006/three-short-pieces>.



TRIQ
.SAMUEL TAYLOR COLI
(POETA 1772-183

Even had his
grandfather proven
himself more thoughtful
than anyone could have ima-
gined, the boy would not have
been ready: one moment
smooth-cheeked and innocent;
the next a son of Lykos,
fully-fledged.

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