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Posted: November 11, 2009 03:01 PM

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# Books: Padgett Powell Has A Few Questions He'd Like To Ask

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*Are your emotions pure? Are your nerves adjustable? How do you stand in relation to the potato? Should it still be Constantinople? Does a nameless horse make you more nervous or less nervous than a named horse? In your view, do children smell good? If before you now, would you eat animal crackers? Could you lie down and take a rest on a sidewalk? Did you love your mother and father, and do Psalms do it for you? If you are relegated to last place in every category, are you bothered enough to struggle up? Does your doorbell ever ring? Is there sand in your craw? Could Mendeleyev place you correctly in*

*a square on a chart of periodic identities, or would you resonate all over the board? How many push-ups can you do?*

In retrospect, it should have been obvious. But when Padgett Powell was writing *The Interrogative Mood* (\$21.99; Ecco) -- a book composed entirely of questions -- it simply hadn't occurred to him.

"I never considered anyone's *answering* these questions," says Powell, the acclaimed author of *Edisto* and collections of award-winning short stories like *Typical*. "My connection to the book was trying to generate the next question, the next correct question. And so I wasn't looking at it in terms of answers. I was looking at it in terms of interrogative correctitude. Given what you asked, what do you now ask and not look stupid?"

"I got a letter from an editor who said, 'I read your piece in The Paris Review and I read it to my girlfriend, my new girlfriend, and she answered all the questions and I think I know her better now. I thank you.' That's the weirdest one I got. Then I got some other letter telling me that somebody was

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proposing that they do a party game with the book. I thought, that sounds good. We can get Parker Brothers to put it in a box and, you know, make cards."



A board game based on a playfully plot-less novel? It's the latest twist in the idiosyncratic but not terribly unusual career of Powell. Like other writers who achieve exceptional acclaim but not the commensurate blockbuster status, Powell has bounced around from publisher to publisher, watching his work go in and out of print while finding refuge in academia. He may not have published a book in the last nine years but Powell has turned the **creative writing department at the University of Florida** (where he is co-chair with author David Leavitt) into one of the most influential in the country.

"In fact," says Powell, who is calling from his home outside Gainesville before heading into work, "the editor who is doing this book, he calls me up periodically and he says, 'Well, everybody I'm running into up here is out of you. The two Chris's. **Chris Bachelder** and **Chris Adrian**. The two Kevins. We've got **Kevin Wilson** over here. **Kevin Canty** over there. Who have you NOT produced?' I said, 'Nobody. They're all mine. They're ALL mine.'"



(Note: I studied with Powell as an undergrad; don't blame him.)

But it's a lot more fun to be dealing with your own success rather than the reflected glory of writers you were smart enough to recruit. And *The Interrogative Mood* has been raking it in, from a **5 star rave by Time Out New York** to praise from the New Yorker (where, ironically, an excerpt from the book was previously rejected by editor David Remnick). Author Rick Moody kicked himself in a review for not thinking of the idea himself but added, "I would not have been able to be this clever and this heartfelt, this funny and this disconsolate, and to make/efface so effectively a narrative that tells its tale only through the process of selecting the seemingly impulsive material." Then Moody proceeded to answer some of the questions himself.

Amazon.com named the book one of the **100 Best of 2009** (and placed it squarely at #100, which surely pleased Powell more than being randomly placed at, say, #87 or #24.) And in a sure sign of "this is your moment-ness," the New York Times Magazine devoted **an expansive feature to Powell**, which charts his path from itinerant roofer turned Southern writer golden boy in the style of Walker Percy to his far more uncategorize-able self today. (Powell is in fine form in the article, offering up anecdotes, for example, about his purchase of 35 chicks, some of whom now reside in his freezer and none of whom provided him with a single egg. "Women will weep if you show them frozen dead chicks," observes Powell when he repeats the story to me.)

*Does any part of your character remind you of that of Fred Rogers, the children's TV-show host? Do you sometimes wish to sit quiet and alone and without a thing to do but sit there, or does this strike you as insupportably idle? Have you ever tried to pole-vault? What sort of height do you think you could achieve pole-vaulting? Can you walk on stilts? If you were offered the option of trying to walk around on those thirty-foot stilts you see in the circus in lieu of trying to pole-vault, which one would you prefer to try? What circumstances would be required before you would attempt to garrote someone with a piano wire? Have you ever eaten a candy flower of the sort used to decorate commercial cakes? Would you like to have a Lamborghini? Was your father a bastard outright, a medium bastard, or a light bastard? Was your mother a saint? Are you annoyed, or amused, by the playfulness of the preceding questions? Are you surprised at the absence of the whole-earth niche in the condom market -- a bio-degradable condom, say, or one made of organic materials, if not stone-*

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ground then at least something like Gore-Tex?

Naturally, since his new book has proven such a success, it was roundly rejected by virtually everyone. But before getting that story I challenge Powell to reject his claim -- made after he published his second novel -- that he had never written a short story. Since that statement, some of his most acclaimed work has come via the short story. (Also some of his funniest, which is one reason Powell may have fallen out of favor for a while. Funny is not appreciated in literary circles -- unless your name involves "Mark" and "Twain".)

"I have never written a short story," insists Powell, who is divorced with two fine daughters, one an actress in Chicago and the other a graduate of a superior college and handy with firearms. "I've written some three page novels and some thirteen page novels. I've written some novels predicated on such poor ideas that they were over in three pages. In fact, I was trying to sell a book before this one fluked out. And I call it *Cries For Help: 45 Failed Novels*. Which is probably a better title than the book is. To judge by its reception, it must be.

"I think it is fair to say I've never written a short story, if you want to hold up say something like a William Trevor story. No, I can't do that. That fucker's good. But I've written a few novels that peter out after 20 pages and they kind of look shapely.

"The story is, well first of all the book was written not even as a book. In fact, you can't even properly say it was written in any traditional sense. I just began putting on my pants and writing these questions and had nothing better to do. They went on for an alarming time. I was in the neighborhood of a 140 pages before I started realizing I was becoming the kind of guy who was going to have seven frozen chicks in his freezer and this was going to be another piece of evidence in that same indictment.

"Nonetheless, it was a book-length manuscript and I sent it. I couldn't get my agent to market it. She wanted to send the *45 Failed Novels*. I wanted this sent with it because it's a failed novel too and it might as well be 46 failed novels. I wanted an editor to be able to see that he had the option of getting a piece of this to be one of the failed 45 or 46. But I couldn't get anybody to go along with that plan. The *45 Failed Novels* were being rejected by everyone. And one party - and this will be relevant - rejected them twice. One party was obliged to look at them twice. This will be relevant in this story.

"What I had done with Book Of Questions was I sent it to The New Yorker. [An editor] liked it and fixed up a piece and the fiction staff liked it and they held it about four months and I thought they were going with it and then I got a note that said, 'David cannot be convinced.' That was given me on Christmas Eve on a Muslim island off the coast of Kenya. My Christmas present was that: 'David cannot be convinced.'

"Then, during the next year or so, the *45 Failed Novels* were rejected by everyone in New York, including the one significant party twice. I had my agent send the Book of Questions to The Paris Review. It was the last thing I was going to do with it. Paris Review bought an excerpt. And the editor who bought it called and said, 'I'm leaving here but I want to work this piece before I go.' I said, 'Good.' And then he called up and he said, 'I still want to work this piece before I go, but I'm not going to have time. I'm going to give it to [another editor]. You're in good hands. Sorry. I've got to go.' Where are you going? 'Oh, I'm going to Ecco.' Alright. See you.

"Then he calls up and says, 'Hey, I'm at Ecco. We're going to do this book.' I said, 'Ok, that's good. But do you not know that Dan Halpern just rejected my other book there for the second time?' He said, 'No.' Or he did. I actually don't know if I brought this up, but I thought that the thing wasn't gonna fly. Here's that story. One of the rejected parties - the one who had rejected it twice - was the editor in chief at Ecco. He rejected it twice because my friend Pete Dexter leaned on him and made him read it again. And he rejected it twice. Then here comes his new editor with a manuscript that he carries into the building in his briefcase. Never mailed in there. It's a manuscript he found on the street. He says, 'Hi, I'm Matt Weiland and here's my first book!' They say that a new editor has an inviolate honeymoon. I thought the honeymoon would be abruptly over if the marriage itself wasn't annulled. But it didn't happen. It worked. So he's publishing the book. And the book has this strange buzz. It's looking like his honeymoon isn't going to be ended on my behalf."

Writing the book, it turns out, was much easier than selling it to a publisher.

"I was innocent of method and innocent of figuring anything out," says Powell, who is 57 years old. "I just did it. There are certain little principles and guides for doing it but I don't know exactly what they are. I think they're kind of a shifting palette anyway. Basically it's just sentence to sentence. And those things that come back up, I'm unaware of. I think there's ten references to blue jays. But I can't say really whether it's ten or three. Or too many. It was done brainlessly is the best answer.

But it came easily?

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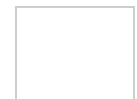
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"Yeah, fairly easily," he says. "You get a kind of, I want to say a blank state of mind but it's not really blank. What it is, you're locating some associations that are not overt. That's probably rule one. For the most part, don't allow an overt association from sentence to sentence. But that does not eliminate the *covert* association. You can't eliminate the covert association. And you don't want to. It's the covert association you want to be alive so you can actually get the next question.

"And then once in a while I break down and say OK, there's another kind of way of having an overt association that won't look retarded. That would be a riff like the questions to Jimi Hendrix. So that's the kind of passage where you can have five or six or eight questions flow from one another, clearly. Some of those questions are so profoundly ignorant. You talk about fact checking. They got into fact checking at the Paris Review and it was mortifying. There was a wrangle about Hemingway's lost stories that nearly killed me. It turns out he didn't lose those stories. They weren't stolen from the platform. And it wasn't the case that he had 32 bags and couldn't keep track of them, as I had very conveniently imagined. The stories were stolen somewhere between the hotel and the train. They were in the care of the wife and it's not known where they were stolen from. Taxi. Left in taxi. Nobody knows, it turns out. In the Paris Review thing, we changed facts so that we weren't an idiot. But in the Ecco book, the idiocy is preserved."

And Powell's career is revived, even though he had somewhat blithely insisted for a while that he was retired from writing, when in fact he was merely retired from publishing.

"I was retired and said I was retired and I still more or less feel that way," says Powell. "Perhaps accidents like this - you now know what an accident this is - perhaps accidents like this punctuate that retirement or can be hung on the tree of that retirement like a bauble. But I don't think the fundamental position changes much. Those *45 Novels* are still rejected. And what I have now is something that looks even less probable than this book of questions. Actually when I told you that I wanted the two books shown at one time, there were actually three books. I wanted all three shown at one time. And this third book could also be taken as a failed novel and could be excerpted. And I'm afraid that it's the hole card now and it looks less supportable than this thing that brave Mr. Weiland rescued. The future looks about the way it does when you buy 35 chickens and don't get an egg."

*Would it require more energy than you have in order for you to really lose it, or do you think really losing it can be a function of having too little energy to prevent losing it? Do the people you do not wish to talk to far exceed the number you do wish to talk to? Do you have much to say to even those to whom you do wish to speak? Do you know where it went wrong with you? Do you own any good copper? Are you favorably disposed to American Indian causes but less so if you must say Native American causes? Are you more at ease in a veneer of civilization or in a true hardwood of barbarity? What is your favorite piece of equipment on a playground? Do you know by sight and sound an oboe from a bassoon? When you hear someone say "There'll be hell to pay," do you assume generally that there will be or won't be hell to pay?*

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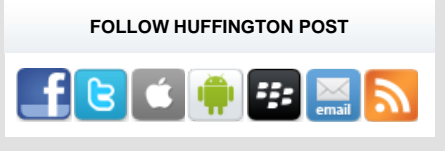
NOTE TO READERS: I was provided with a final copy of Powell's book, albeit before I committed to any coverage. Typically, I write about less than 5% of the many books I'm sent by publishers. I did study under Padgett Powell when I was a student at the University of Florida. Usually, I avoid writing about people I know, however modestly. Though I enjoyed his classes immensely, I haven't spoken to Powell in perhaps 15 years and considered any conflict of interest to be minimal at best. I never applied for the writing program (I took creative writing courses as an undergraduate elective) and Powell never championed my fiction to any editor or publisher. (I told you he had good taste.)

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