

John Holman on Craft and Character

by *Ellen Birkett Morris*

“Plot often develops out of the tension between characters, and in order to get that tension, a writer sometimes has to be something of a matchmaker, creating characters who counterpoint one another.”

—*Charles Baxter*

I met John Holman at a writing workshop on character in Louisville, Kentucky, at the Louisville Literary Arts’ Writer’s Block Festival. The festival brought together poets, essayists, and fiction writers in a former-manufacturing building that now holds a gallery, a bookstore and coffee shop, art studios, and a beer garden. Inside the large building, groups of writers gathered to discuss the power of the right words arranged in the right way.

With a quiet manner, Holman, whose work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Oxford American*, *Paste*, and the *Mississippi Review*, led a discussion on how having two very different characters in a story can serve to illuminate aspects of each character and heighten the narrative tension as the characters clash.

During the workshop, Holman offered excerpts of stories from Jhumpa Lahiri, Raymond Carver, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, which, as Baxter says, pushed together people “who bring out a crucial response to each other.” Starting with the adage “character is plot,” Holman laid out how stories developed from such “counterpointed characterization” rather than from the standard notion of conflict emerge organically and gain deeper meaning and value, springing as

they do already rich with associations from the mind of the writer.

Using Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby as an example, Holman said character development materializes from contrast not opposition. “Differences can expose personalities. We can see the masks fall. It is about what surfaces from their proximity. What happens when you put two people together? Which character most engages our empathy?”

In a later phone conversation, Holman expanded upon his own development as a writer. Growing up in a house with a mother who was an English teacher, Holman found words early. “Her interest in books had an influence on me. I enjoyed taking refuge in stories,” said Holman. By the time he reached junior high, he was writing short stories to entertain himself and his friends. He went to college with the hope of becoming a journalist, but his desire to create his own stories rather than work on the stories of others drew him to major in English instead.

According to the Georgia Center for the Book website, Holman received a BA in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1973, his MA in English from North Carolina Central University in 1977, and his PhD in English and creative writing from the University of Southern Mississippi in 1983 where he studied with the writer Frederick Barthelme. Holman has been on the faculty at Georgia State University for more than fifteen years and served as their former director of the Creative Writing Program.

Barthelme guided Holman to the work of Raymond Carver with the advice to be judicious about word choice. “I think it was an antidote to me trying to pack as many words as I could into a sentence. From reading Carver, I learned it was

okay to write about non-heroic characters or people not striving for large goals. I learned that the stories of the people in my neighborhood were worth telling,” said Holman.

Carver’s cast of drinkers and dreamers spend a lot of time hanging around, pondering their lives, battling themselves. The characters in Holman’s “Credentials” are equally listless and uneasy. Belly Man, an ex-con, renews his auto tags and waits for a haircut at the barber shop, while trying to figure out his next steps and stay out of trouble. Ultimately content with his “big burgundy car,” the character is described as “a Lincoln man,” a car he muses is “built for comfort—rest assured—and always would be.”

Holman’s goal is to create a vivid image in the fewest number of words and to use language that immerses the reader in the character’s sensory experience. “It happens organically. I try to put myself in that character’s situation and be honest about what my emotional reaction would be,” said Holman. His short story “The Story of Art History” in his collection *Squabble and Other Stories* was sparked when Holman noticed a yellow painted curb under the streetlight, which looked prettier at night than during the day. He set out to explore who might notice it, under what circumstances, and why that would make a difference.

“Given that the story is titled ‘The Story of Art History,’ with irony since it can’t be, really be that, the yellow curb functions as an image of pure color and form, abstract beauty that is highlighted in the character’s banal reality,” Holman explained as we spoke by phone. “[The character] notices it during his walk to his old friend’s house where he meets a young woman who is an art history major and is struggling to write an essay on Gauguin. There, he finds joy in sliding around on her red nylon undergarments, which she encourages, so he finds unexpected pleasure in being immersed, up to his

ankles at least, in that passionate color. While not exactly a yellow brick road, and not consciously intended to be, he follows the curb to a strange and thrilling experience, which some art can provide.”

With his students, Holman stresses the necessity for conflict in a story and for exploring each character’s desires. When deepening character, he asks his students to delve “into whose life has this trouble come” and to provide answers within the story.

Holman encourages students to be sensitive to the sounds of words—assonance, rhyme, etc.—and to pay attention to the fluency of the words they put on the pages. Holman believes that by reading widely students can trigger memories and experiences that may become fodder for fiction. He does not believe that vision cannot be taught. “By vision, I mean looking at the world in a particular way to know where the stories are,” said Holman. In addition to mining their personal experience, Holman advises his students to read like a writer. “If you like something you read, ask yourself why and what the writer did to create that effect in you as a reader. Then write and try to mimic that effect.”

“As a musician needs to listen to music, a painter needs to look at paintings, and a writer needs to read,” said Holman. He also suggests taking notes about visual images that strike you or interesting overheard conversations. “Keep a scrapbook of ideas that you can go to when you are ready to write new stories.” As Holman did when he used the yellow curb as a jumping-off point for “The Story of Art History.”

Squabble and Other Stories, his novel, *Luminous Mysteries*, and the linked stories in *Triangle Ray* deal with people, particularly African Americans, finding their place in society. This theme springs from Holman’s experience of going to college and graduate school and finding himself “a stranger in a strange land.”

“It has been interesting, as an African American writer, to look at the world from outside the mainstream,” said Holman. When asked if the current racial tension in America has amplified his experience, Holman said, “It throws [my experience] into greater relief. It is not any different than it has been, but it is portrayed more vividly in the media.” Holman is currently working on a novel in stories about the gentrification of an Atlanta neighborhood, which brings together people of vastly different socio-economic backgrounds. These characters are sure to provide interesting counterpoints that enrich the plot and increase the tension of the narrative. ♦