

WILLIAM CONESCU: WRITING LIFE as it HAPPENS

The first person to graduate from North Carolina State University's MFA program in Creative Writing in 2004, William Conescu is making good use of this inaugural degree. He secured a book deal from Harper Perennial for his first novel, *Being Written* (2008), and is already working on a second.

Being Written centers around Daniel Fischer, a rather mundane character whose only unique talent is his ability, at times, to hear the scratching sound of an author writing in these books. He decides to take matters into his own hands in an attempt to become a protagonist instead of solely a supporting character and bonds with a group of young artists led by an attractive, dynamic singer named Delia. All the characters in *Being Written* are trying to find their paths (career and personal) in the post-college world, especially Daniel, whose skewed idea of what it means to be "interesting" in literary terms leads him to make some demonstrably unfortunate decisions.

Being Written formed the basis of Conescu's MFA thesis. As a classmate of his at NCSU, I remember that even back then, he wasn't afraid to take risks in his writing, often experimenting with plural first and second person narrators. Unlike some students who shied away from the more unusual points of view, Conescu used this technique to expand the meaning and depth of his writing. In *Being Written*, he uses both second and third person to distinguish between Daniel's experiences "on stage" as someone actively "being written" and the rest of the characters, who are unaware that their fates are in the hands of an invisible author.

During his undergraduate education, Conescu studied under Doris Betts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he earned his bachelor's degree in English with Highest Honors in Creative Writing and was also awarded UNC's Louis D. Rubin Prize in Creative Writing. Following graduation, Conescu worked at various jobs, including a stint teaching English in Korea. He has also taught undergraduate creative writing courses at North Carolina



LOUISA J. DANG is a native of Scotland but has lived in North Carolina for most of her life. She holds an MFA in creative writing from NCSU, and her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in several publications including

Our State, *North Carolina Signature*, *State House Review*, and *Alamance Magazine*. She was the winner of the 2004 Duke University Writers Workshop Prize and has a short story in *Only Connect*, an anthology published by Main Street Rag.

State University and Duke University, and he has conducted creative writing workshops through Duke Continuing Studies, Durham Technical Community College, and the Duke Young Writers' Camp. Conescu is currently the Director of Development Communications in Duke University's Office of Alumni and Development Communications.

Conescu's short stories have been published in such venues as *The Gettysburg Review*, *New Letters*, the *News & Observer*, and *Green Mountains Review*. In 2008, he was selected for an emerging writers fellowship to the Sun Valley Writers' Conference in Sun Valley, Idaho. Although Conescu grew up in New Orleans and has lived in North Carolina for most of his adult life, he does not necessarily consider himself a "Southern writer." He was born in New York and spent several years in Boston, and as he points out in his interview, it's getting harder to determine what exactly classifies a writer as "Southern." In an increasingly global culture, the borders between regions are shifting and melting. The definition of what it means to be Southern is constantly changing, and Conescu is at the forefront of this phenomenon, presenting a fresh voice in the new New South.

LOUISA J. DANG: *I'll start with an obvious question: Anyone who hasn't read your novel may be thinking that the concept sounds an awful lot like the movie Stranger Than Fiction (2006, Columbia Pictures, written by Zach Helm), in which the main character suddenly finds himself the subject of narration that only he can hear; like your Daniel, the movie's main character is in a book currently being written. I know you began working on Being Written before the movie came out – what are your thoughts on the similarities between your book and this film?*

WILLIAM CONESCU: *I was certainly curious to see the movie when it came out. My novel was already written and in the hands of an agent at that time. I think both the screenwriter and I were interested in writing about self-aware characters, but what that meant to us was very different. For one thing, in my novel, Daniel*

an interview BY **LOUISA J. DANG**

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The interview was conducted in person at a coffee shop in Chapel Hill, NC, on 20 July 2008, with followup emails to edit and clarify.

For more information about William Conescu and the novel *Being Written*, visit www.williamconescu.com.

exists in a separate reality from the author of the book that's being written. Also, Daniel doesn't wake up and find himself the subject of a book. He's *dying* to be more than a minor character, so he hurls himself into the path of the story and keeps coming back for more, telling a few lies, posing as a writer himself, doing things that keep the story exciting enough to be written so that he is integral to it.

Point of view is a big part of your novel. In Being Written, you alternate between chapters written in second person for Daniel's point of view and third person for Delia and everyone else's points of view. That must have been rather technically challenging—why did you decide to follow this approach, rather than taking an easier way out and doing it all in third person or just writing from Daniel's first person point of view?

This proved to be the easier way. I wrote an entire draft in the third person, but Daniel's sections were less engaging than the other characters' sections. He's the only character in the novel who's aware that he exists in the imagination of an author, but in the third person draft, I hadn't distinguished his unusual voice and perspective from the others. As soon as I started writing in the second person, it felt right, and I thought, gosh, I wish I'd thought of this a year ago!

The second person point of view definitely has a different feel to it than in the third person chapters; it's much more intense in some ways.

It's more neurotic. The second person can give a sense of a character talking to himself. The first time I encountered second person in fiction was in the novel *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney. The book was being passed around when I was in high school, and I thought it was so cool. And then I wrote a short story in the second person, and a friend who went to UNC ahead of me shared it with Doris Betts (who probably won't remember any of this). So, I was already a fan of second person. It's just funny that it took so long to click for me that I should use that point of view in this novel.

"THE SCRATCHING IS STILL WITH YOU, quieter but there. The author is waiting for something to happen."
(Being Written 47)



Maybe it helped prepare you in a way?

I guess it probably did.

Because the second person is kind of intimidating, I always think, and it's not very common.

True. I already had a latent love for it or something, you know. Once I started, I thought, this is just wild fun.

I know in graduate school you tended to, in a couple of instances, go for the more experimental approach, not always taking the easy route. Was that on purpose?

I'm definitely interested in point of view. And actually, one of our professors at State, Angela Davis-Gardner, once mentioned a short story anthology called *Points of View* [edited by James Moffett and Kenneth R. McElheny, Mentor, 1966]. She said you could teach a whole course with it. And I actually followed up on that and taught a fiction workshop using that book, first at Durham Tech and then through Duke Continuing Studies. We focused entirely on the exploration of point of view, looking at the nuances of third person and first person and second

ABOVE: Conescu reading at Quail Ridge Books & Music in Raleigh, NC, 24 Sept. 2008.

person, of course. And it was sort of like I was teaching the class that I would have loved to have taken.

Do you think it's important to experiment, rather than sticking with the same thing? Do you think it's important for fiction writers, in general, to challenge themselves a little bit?

Sure, I think it's important to challenge yourself in ways that you feel will be useful and enjoyable to you. Experimenting with point of view is a way of challenging myself that I find amusing. There are many other ways to do it – from the characters you choose to the subject matter.

It was kind of a leading question.

It was. My next project has its own flavor of strangeness to it, but it's written entirely in the third person, so I can't say you always have to do wild and crazy things with the point of view.

Some writers seem to focus more on technique than the actual story. With your novel, I noticed that parts were in second person, but it didn't get in the way of the story. I wasn't so focused on it that I was thinking, oh, my god, he just switched point of view. Do you have any thoughts on this?

Well, one thing I'll say about this novel is that it's definitely a writerly story because it's about "being written," about the writing process. So there's a self-consciousness about writing. But I think it's pretty fast-paced. Sometimes technique can slow a story down if you're trying to show "writerliness." Sometimes technique slows it down in a pleasant way, and other times it can just weigh the story down. You have to be careful.

Most people, I think, can pick up your book and enjoy it for the plot and the character development and not have to be conscious of the changing points of views.

I hope so. One thing I've noticed just by reading a number of second person books is that they tend to

feature characters who have unusual states of mind or ways of thinking. It might feel as if the character is talking to himself. That all really worked for Daniel because he has this awareness that he really doesn't want – this sense of being on the page. To know that you're in a book and that you're a minor character – that's not going to be a good feeling.

Are you the scratching pencil?

I don't think so. I don't really think of me as that character because the author, the person who's writing with the pencil, is whoever Daniel perceives him to be. We never meet him or her. We only hear of him or her interpreted.

In Daniel's mind, this is the narrator?

He refers to it as "the author" – the author wants him to do this, must mean for him to do that. The author in the book might be viewed as a character who never appears.

It's interesting that Daniel wants to be a writer – to impress Delia and her friends, but also to make himself a more interesting character. I found it funny that he was so bad at writing. What were you trying to say with him attempting (badly) to be a writer?

He's someone who doesn't appreciate the kind of book he's in. Daniel is a fan of spy novels. He feels like a protagonist needs to have access to an FBI database or he isn't worth writing about. That's his idea of what a protagonist is and what he needs to be. That's the basis against which he's judging his own performance. There's definitely some tension between the type of book that Daniel reads and expects to be in and the book that he's actually entered.

It makes sense that he hasn't been able to get a big role in the author's books if he doesn't have a clue about what the author's trying to do.

Right.

"You don't have a dark past, a bright future, a pure heart, a great mind, a chiseled jaw, a sultry lover, or a gun. Why would you expect the author to focus on you?" (*Being Written 4*)

Daniel acts differently than he normally would because he's hearing the scratching pencil.

He's a little bit more aggressive in certain areas, taking risks he wouldn't normally. It made me think about the choices we make as individuals. How do you think Daniel's life would have been if he had not heard the scratching pencil?

Definitely, it's guided his life. When he was in college and figuring out what to do, he discovered the universe didn't work the way he thought it did. Then he realized, oh, here's my relationship with the universe: I am a

minor character in a world that's being written. So how important is what I do? And what should I do when I brush against these stories that are more consequential than my life? What makes these people get written, rather than me? This realization – which takes place before the novel opens – contextualizes his life and all of his subsequent choices. It does him no

good to be depressed about it. So he thinks about how he might get into other stories, and by the time Delia comes along, he is thinking, I have missed opportunities. I am going to get into this story.

COURTESY OF MONTY CONESCU, WRITER, WITH MISS FERGUSON



"WITH THE AUTHOR'S PRESENCE
always comes a sense of expectation,
and it's a lot of pressure thinking
on the spot like this."

(Being Written 123–24)

I see what you mean about the "author" contextualizing Daniel's existence. Daniel's actions have a different significance to the reader because you're thinking, well, it's to get into a novel. It gives his actions different consequences than regular people.

Exactly. The standards by which he's judging his own actions are different from the standards by which others might judge them. That's true for some other characters in the book as well.

Were you aware of all this sub-context as you were writing?

Well, I was. I think I was aware of it all and sort of seeing where it went rather than overthinking it. But definitely, there was no getting around the "Daniel as man, author as god" metaphor, the created and the creator. And I knew that Daniel's unusual struggle tied in well with the more familiar struggles the other characters in the novel are facing. They're trying to figure out what to do with their abilities and dreams and how best to live their lives.

Each character does seem to represent a different role. I'm specifically thinking about Monty. He's the only one who's chosen to settle down, get a "proper" job, and get married. I felt like the others kind of looked down on him a little bit. There was a hint that maybe he is selling out, and I wondered if that was intentional?

Each character makes different choices about how to go about young adulthood, and Monty is a more traditional kind of character. He's from a moneyed family that doesn't have money any more. He feels entitled to a certain lifestyle, and since there aren't family resources to support it, he's going to earn the money himself. He has ambition in ways the others don't, but Graham and Delia went to an art school, and there's sort of a pride in that. There's some tension between him and, for instance, Graham, who is a poor but talented pianist and has a very different perspective on money.

You've said in the past that you were interested in the idea of people in their late twenties, thirties, after they've graduated from college, trying to figure out what they want to do with their lives. That was one theme you wanted to explore in this book.

ABOVE LEFT Conescu in his office at NCSU

RIGHT Conescu at McIntyre's Fine Books at Farrington Village, Pittsboro, NC, 16 Oct. 2008

Definitely.

And the arts in particular: Delia is in theater, Graham is a pianist, and Jon wanted to be an actor.

And they think Daniel's a writer.

Right. And they're all sort of suspended in this wanting to be in the arts but not able to get a job in them. Do you think the arts in particular lead to this sort of indecision or suspension?

Well, don't you? Aren't we in there, too, trying to pursue our artistic interests and make a living as well?

Yes!

It's tricky, you know. I always knew I wanted to write fiction. I knew it when I was in middle school. I knew it in high school. I knew it going to college, but until I graduated, it never crossed my mind once to think about a job.

Also, I didn't understand how to pursue publishing. I'd write a story and think, well, let's see if *The New Yorker* likes this. That was my idea of what it meant to pursue publishing. I didn't know anything about literary magazines. I didn't educate myself about what it would mean to be a professional writer. And I kept moving around and thinking I'd write more when things settled down. Then somehow a year would pass, and I would barely have written a word.

And I was seeing similar things happen to some of my friends: the actors who had moved to New York weren't acting – or they were acting some, but their lives weren't shaped the way they wished they were. Some people were developing new interests and careers. I was seeing that among actors and writers and musicians. We were trying to figure out how to fit our pursuit of art into our young adulthood. So, definitely I wanted to play with that problem in this novel.

Is that why you decided to do the MFA in creative writing at NC State?

Yes, that was me saying, okay, I obviously have said to myself enough times, "Next year, I'll write more." And it still wasn't happening. So, I quit my job, I went to State full time, and I reorganized my life around fiction writing. And when I graduated, I said, you need to keep this up. And I definitely have been doing that, even now that I have a day job again.

So, you gave yourself permission to pursue writing?

It was even more: it was a mandate. When I entered the MFA program I had the idea for *Being Written*, and that was in my application. I wanted to get back into the habit of writing, and since I had benefited so much from the writing workshops at UNC – and even in high school – I knew I worked well in a school environment.

Did the MFA give you more of an idea of what the publishing world was about?

Yes, one goal of the program is for you to have a publishable manuscript when you graduate, and I really took that to heart. As you know, I was the first one to complete the program – NC State used to offer an MA in creative writing, not an MFA – so I felt like my professors were especially excited for me, and I wanted to have this manuscript ready to go. They were helpful providing guidance on where to submit short stories, what literary



magazines to pursue. So, I started submitting and had a few pieces published while I was in graduate school. They also helped me think about what to say to an agent and how to pursue book publishing. I'm very grateful to Wilton Barnhardt, John Kessel, and Angela Davis-Gardner.

Do you think programs like the MFA, or any arts program, should be preparing the students for a career, or is it even possible to prepare for a career in the arts?

I think most people aren't going to be able to support themselves pursuing their art, and I think you have to be prepared for that. That's what I wish I had understood when I was eighteen. Would I have done anything differently? Maybe. And would it have been better? Probably not. I jumped around doing different things, and I've worked for a while as a writer at Duke, and I've been very happy. But I think you have to have two selves – there's your day-to-day professional self and the writer self. And it's hard because it involves a tremendous amount of rejection and a tremendous amount of time. You need to build community, too, through a writers' group or continuing ed classes. I never thought to look into continuing ed writing workshops during my in-between years, but now that I've taught a few, I see what I missed. They can be great.

How did your writing process or style change as a result of the MFA?

One thing that was pointed out to me was that I needed to read more contemporary fiction and that a lot of writers who study the classics and read the classics and fall in love with the classics start writing not-so-contemporary-sounding fiction. I was a bit guilty of that, so I started reading contemporary authors much more. And I guess I started experimenting with my writing and with point of view.

What sorts of contemporary authors?

I read Don DeLillo, Jonathan Lethem, Stewart O'Nan, Amy Bloom, Haruki Murakami. It was good to get in the habit of reading different kinds of authors – not just Edith Wharton and Vladimir Nabokov, whom I love.

Do you classify yourself as a Southern writer?

I don't have the best answer for that. I'm from the South, many of my teachers have been Southern writers, I grew up in New Orleans, and I've adopted North Carolina as my home; but I don't know that someone reading my stuff would consider me a Southern writer. But what is a Southern contemporary writer? Part of the answer might just be the cliché that it's such an interconnected world now that people aren't so regional anymore. Someone from the South can write about life in the Midwest – or life in Japan.

Your novel isn't set in the South. There's no way of reading it and saying, oh, yeah, he's from the South.

I don't think so either. My next book is set, in part, in North Carolina, but I don't think others would classify me as a regional writer, so I wouldn't presume to classify myself that way.

What are your plans now? Do you see teaching creative writing in your future?

I've enjoyed teaching creative writing, and I've certainly thought about a teaching career, but it's not something I'm actively pursuing. For the moment I'm focusing my creative energy on writing the next novel.

So, you're working on another novel now?

Yes, and that's very much where my brain is. And that's good. I'm very happy for that to be where my brain is. ■

