

WTP 2017 Winner: Kris Faatz

Posted By: Press Features on: December 07, 2017 In: 2017 WTP Winners, Interviews, LATEST FEATURES, Writing, writing interview No Comments



Second Place for the Literary

Interview by August Smith, WTP Feature Writer



August Smith

Kris Faatz (*rhymes with skates*) is a fiction writer and musician. Her first novel, *To Love a Stranger*, was a finalist for the 2016 Schaffner Press Music in Literature Award and was released May 2017 by Blue Moon Publishers (Toronto, ON). Kris's short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Kenyon Review Online*, *Potomac Review*, *Glassworks*, *Reed*, *Bluestem*, *Luna Station Quarterly*, and *Digging Through the Fat*, among other journals. She has been a contributor at the *Kenyon Review Writers and Novel Workshops* and the *Sewanee Writers' Conference*, and will return to the *Kenyon Review Writers Workshop* in 2017 as the recipient of a *Peter Taylor Fellowship*.

Smith: I'd like to start off with some questions about your story, "Let Me Take Your Hands." The story has obvious timely political implications, as it touches on issues like immigration and national heritage. I'm interested to know how this story developed, whether its origin is as a response to national policy or if it began somewhere else and found itself in that realm.

Faatz: Great question! "Hands" was a particularly interesting story for me to write, because it went through one of the longest sets of permutations of any of my stories. Sometimes a story will evolve more or less in a straight line from the first idea to the finished draft, but "Hands" had a convoluted path.

After the 2016 election, I felt, like many artists, particular urgency to respond to what was coming for our country, but I didn't know how to go about that. Words can seem like awfully small things in a big and chaotic world.

I knew I wanted to write a story that in some way touched on the need for people to have compassion and mercy toward one another. Immigration was very much on my mind, but I didn't start "Hands" with the idea that it would specifically be a story about an illegal immigrant. The story first got a start when I was traveling in rural Virginia. I saw how once-proud communities were deteriorating, and I saw some of the desperation that I thought had helped bring about the election results.

Originally, I wanted to write a story about a character in one of those communities. Pretty soon, though, I knew there would be a Mexican immigrant involved somehow, and that was when the setting moved from Virginia over to Colorado. I was reluctant to leave Virginia behind, but at that point I knew the story was moving in a very different direction from what I'd originally thought. (I still have my early notes and plan to go back to them and write that other piece.)

The blend of cultures in Telluride made it a natural setting for the kind of story "Hands" wanted to be, but the story still didn't take off until I figured out who the characters were. All three of my main characters went through a lot of changes before they settled into their final forms.

I didn't set out to write an "immigration story," but I'm very glad that's what "Hands" decided to be. While I was working on it, the national spotlight on immigration got more and more intense, and it felt good to know I was responding to that in some way.



Kris Faatz

Smith: The ending of the story is very interesting to me. Though it's ostensibly a "happy" ending, it's fraught with potential complications and anxieties. It feels both realistic and noteworthy, a stroke of luck in an uncaring system. Can you talk a bit about how you wrote your way into this ending? Were there other ending options for these characters, and how did you land on this one?

Faatz: With some of my short stories, I've gone in with at least some idea of how they're going to end, but this one had no plan. It was a really interesting writing experience, because I got my main characters into the "hole" I'd expected (Consuelo was going to be deported, Antonio had her daughter on his hands), and then I didn't know what to do with them. My vague idea had been to let the deportation happen, but I couldn't make that work with Tess (Consuelo's daughter) being the character she was. The story had to end with a sense of redemption, and if Tess lost her mother, it wouldn't.

I had to do some research to figure out what I could do instead, and realized I'd been very lucky to set the story in Colorado. Antonio and Consuelo had options there that they wouldn't have had in many other states.

The way the story ends now, we definitely have the sense of complications waiting to happen. We know this isn't a "happy ever after" of any kind, but I wanted to end at a point where the characters had reached a balance, as fragile as that balance is.

Smith: The topic of the story is highly contentious one. Did you run into any risks or tricky areas when writing about this polarizing topic? How did you overcome those risks?

Faatz: For this story, I wanted to get inside Antonio's head, and make him and Consuelo and Tess as authentically human as I could. I didn't really worry about anything else. As writers, we can definitely get caught up in concerns about what people will think of our work, or whether we have the right to tell a story that doesn't come from our own cultural background, but I tend to be pretty selfish. If I want to tell a story, I put blinders on until it's on the page.

I did want to be sure that "Hands" was believable. When I started writing about the threat of deportation to Consuelo, I remember thinking, "This couldn't really happen, nobody would make her leave her dependent child, this is some kind of dystopian future." Then I read a news article in which this exact thing happened to a woman who was deported to Mexico and had to leave her young teenage daughter behind. I was horrified. It lit a fire under me to finish "Hands" and get the story out there.

Smith: Did research play a role in writing this story?

Faatz: It did, both with respect to what Antonio and Consuelo end up doing to resolve her situation, and with respect to Antonio's history. I really enjoyed creating his past. I didn't know much about Mexican history, but based on the kind of man Antonio is, I had a rough sense of the kinds of things he must have done when he was young. It was a question of learning the real story and finding his place in it.

Smith: In your opinion, do writers and artists have an obligation to respond to political crises, especially ones of deep ethical import?

Faatz: I think each of us has to make the work that speaks to us, that wants us to make it. With that said, I do think that writers and artists have great power to respond to what's happening in the world. In my own work, one of the things I most want to do is build bridges between people. Fiction writers, storytellers, can capture human experience and share it in a way that's effective and totally nonthreatening (we're just telling stories, not laying out arguments). We have an entryway into people's hearts and imaginations, and we can immerse people in experiences they may never have considered before. When you do that kind of work, you can change people's perspectives, one reader at a time.

Smith: How did you come to be a writer of fiction? To what do you owe your origins as a story writer?

Faatz: This is kind of complicated! I loved writing stories when I was a kid, and my first ambition was actually to be a writer. (I was also a huge reader, and have been all my life.) In college, though, I double-majored in engineering and music, and then I went on in music for grad school. At that point I planned to be a professional musician for good, but about ten years ago, I had a job fall through and ended up with extra time and some frustration and disappointment to burn. I found myself going back to writing, after what had been a long hiatus. As I started studying the craft seriously, I found myself more and more fascinated with it. I'm still a professional musician, both a teacher and a performer, but writing is now the other half (and sometimes more than half) of my professional life. I've kind of come full circle, back to that first ambition.

Smith: Your debut novel, *To Love A Stranger*, came out this year. In researching, I learned that this novel took you ten years to complete. What is it like working on a project that long? How did you stay motivated to finish the novel?

Faatz: *Stranger* was actually what got me back into writing after getting away from it for a while. Ten years ago, when I started experimenting again with writing, I had the idea that I was going to write a novel based on people I'd met in the music world, and experiences I'd had there. I especially wanted to capture the backstage world of the symphony, the personalities and energy and drama you find in it.



I thought I'd have a book draft in a few months (no problem!). Very quickly, though, I saw how much I didn't know about writing, and how much work I was going to have to do to develop the necessary skills.

The ten-year process of *Stranger*, from first idea to seeing the book in print, was also the process of learning to be a writer: both learning the craft and identifying myself as that kind of artist. The biggest motivation to stick with *Stranger* came from my main character, whose story demanded to be written. To be honest, the process was so long and sometimes so discouraging that I don't know if I could have done it for any other book. My main character's story burned in my head and I couldn't stop trying until I got it finished. Seeing it through to publication was both a joy and a huge relief.

Smith: You've also spent some time as a creative writing teacher. Obviously, being in this role means you have a strong effect on your students' writing, but has teaching affected the way you look at your own writing? If yes, how?

Faatz: For me, the most exciting thing about teaching is how consciously you look at a student's writing, to see what's working in it and what isn't. I'm always fascinated with what makes writing powerful or less so, and I love pulling it apart to see what holds it together and what can make it stronger.

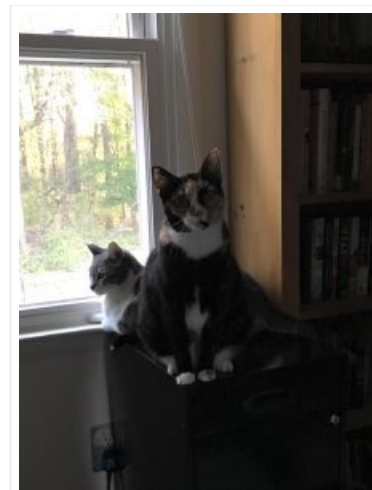
In terms of my own writing, I think teaching has gotten me to think more systematically about what I do when I revise. Writing a draft is basically throwing all my ideas onto the page. Then, in revision, I dig into the story and find out what it wants to be and how to get it there. It's the most satisfying problem-solving process I know. In teaching, especially teaching students about revision, I've looked hard at my own methods and thought about what I do that works well and what I might do better.

Smith: You're also an accomplished pianist. Do you see your two art forms as interrelated in some way? How do they inform one another?

Faatz: Absolutely, music and writing are connected for me. Music inspires my writing in concrete ways, as with *Stranger* and some of my short fiction, but more generally, it gets my writer brain going. Often, when I get stuck on a writing project, I'll go to the piano and play something I know well, and/or that evokes the kind of mood I want to create in my work. When I keep my hands busy that way, the ideas tend to start flowing again.

I find that the connection works the other way, too. When I was a kid taking piano lessons, I liked to create stories in my head to compliment the pieces I was playing. These days, I don't make up concrete stories as often, but my writing often helps me tap into emotions that inform my playing and make it stronger.

Smith: Last but not least, what are you working on now?



Faatz's cats and writing buddies

Faatz: A few things, actually (and I sometimes wish I was more focused on just one!). A couple of short stories have suggested themselves, and I'm experimenting with those. I also have a full draft of a fantasy novel I wrote a couple of years ago, which lately I've been reimagining from the ground up. Fantasy is my favorite type of fiction to read, but because I also love to go in-depth with my characters and get to know them very well, I want to create a literary, character-driven feel with this book.

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