

The Rumpus Interview with David Goodwillie and Teddy Wayne

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Two debut novels addressing – amongst other topics ripped from the Zeitgeist – the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media, appear this month in bookstores: *American Subversive* (Scribner) by David Goodwillie (also author of the memoir, *Seemed Like A Good Idea At The Time*), and *Kapitoil* (Harper Perennial), by recent NEA Creative Writing Fellowship winner Teddy Wayne. If it has been “too soon” in the past for these kinds of novels, both of these books now feel right on time.

American Subversive, which the Associated Press calls, “a triumphant work of fiction,” tracks dueling perspectives. One is a Gawker-esque blogger who receives information about the identity of a terrorist whom he investigates, and the other the terrorist herself. It’s a taut literary thriller, difficult to put down, buoyed by wickedly incisive commentary on the state of our union.

Kapitoil’s narrator, Qatari citizen Karim (whose voice the *Houston Chronicle* describes as a “carefully articulated...thing of beauty”), works in the World Trade Center just months before 9/11, and invents a software program that predicts oil futures based on the media’s coverage of terrorism. Wayne has written a surprisingly – given the subject matter – heartwarming coming-of-age tale, rife with clever wordplay and smart cultural analysis. *Kapitoil* is a fully addictive read.

Goodwillie and Wayne – don’t they sound like they should be a super cop duo? – recently discussed via email the still-looming threat of terrorism, the agendas of Fox and MSNBC, and promoting yourself via Twitter, which, shockingly, neither one of them seems to particularly enjoy. (And catch them both across the country soon at numerous events: Goodwillie reads in New York City today, April 22, at Barnes and Noble Tribeca at 7 PM, while Wayne tackles California next week, starting in Los Angeles on April 26, at 826 LA East at 8 PM.)

The Rumpus: Both of your books take place in New York City, where you both live. I know you were both here for the World Trade Center attacks. How do you think New Yorkers feel about terrorism nine years after the fact? It seems to me like people don’t talk about it that much, that there has been some sort of shift that perhaps has something to do at least in small part with a collective New York bravado.

David Goodwillie: There’s a certain fatalistic attitude towards terrorism in New York – especially in Manhattan, where I live. We’re aware of our esteemed position as target number one, of course. For years now, we’ve seen SWAT teams on the subways, police boats in the harbor, bomb-sniffing dogs at Penn Station. And most of us experienced 9/11 in some first- or second-hand way. But the truth, of course, is that no one thinks or talks about it much. It’s a bit like *Fight Club*: for a New Yorker, the first rule of 9/11 is that you don’t discuss it. We leave that for outsiders.

Really though, when it comes to terrorism, we’re all just too busy to deal with it. Terror today is something of an idle man’s game; it’s participants—from Bin Laden to McVeigh to the Unabomber—are usually rural types with time enough to develop dangerous ideas—and deadly weapons.

And that goes for regular citizens who obsess about it, too. After 9/11, it was the people farthest away from New York and Washington that were screaming the loudest

about patriotism and revenge. There's so much going on in the reality of every-day New York that potential threats—even doomsday kind of stuff—naturally take a backseat. Even when something does happen here—the anthrax attacks, say—people push it out of mind quickly.

Teddy Wayne: I don't think New Yorkers are any braver or even much busier than people in the rest of the country. We have short memories, for one, and we grew weary of the constantly shifting rainbow-colored threat warnings of the Bush years. Most important, people are more concerned now about getting laid off than they are about getting bombed.

But it seems almost inevitable that another attack of some stripe will occur in New York. We live in a relatively open society. It takes just one person with access to even mildly advanced weaponry to cause mass destruction, and New York is a symbolically potent target. And it's increasingly likely that such an attack will come from an American citizen, as in the recent kamikaze mission on the IRS building in Texas, and that is essentially impossible to defend against.

Rumpus: Both of your books explore the relationship between media and terrorism. How much do you feel like the media stokes the fires of terrorism, and how much do you think terrorism needs media in order to survive?

Wayne: Here's a new Zen koan: If terrorists blow something up in a city, but no one reports on it, does it make a sound? Well, yes and no. The terrorists still certainly cause terror among the populace, but their larger political goals, which require media attention, may go unheeded.

I think the media, especially TV, love reporting on terrorism, just as they love reporting on elections, scandals, and any other spectacles of fear, distraction, and sin. But what's more dangerous than a source like Fox News—which preaches to the choir and which, if you can't decode its blatant agenda, you're probably not a very astute observer of the political scene to begin with (not to say that MSNBC doesn't have its own equally blatant agenda)—are when seemingly moderate, supposedly “objective” news sources spin events in far subtler ways.

Goodwillie: I almost can't watch television news anymore. Even places like MSNBC—which I'm aligned with politically—have become as bad as FOX. Keith Olbermann makes me want to shoot myself. (Although I do have a soft spot for Rachel Maddow.) To say nothing of the half-hour “health and weather updates” that constitute the network nightly news shows.

I remember tuning in to one of the cable news stations—I think it was CNN—to see what would happen when the Tsunami waves hit Hawaii after the earthquake in Chile. The anchors and reporters built up the tension for an hour as a countdown clock – the weather people had the Tsunami's arrival figured out to the minute – approached zero. And then...nothing happened. The sea stayed calm. You could sense the media's disappointment through the screen.

Finally, the anchor cut in and addressed the situation, saying something like, “It's not that we were rooting for a catastrophe. I don't want anyone to get that impres-

sion.” But of course they fucking were! They were begging for those waves to roll in. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I hope the farce that TV news has become (I don’t think CNN will last another two years in its current form) gets people to start reading newspapers again. Not that things are much better in print.

Rumpus: This is not related to terrorism necessarily, but it is connected to being in assault mode. You are both debut novelists in a time when people seem to care less about books, or are at least buying less of them, there are less review outlets, and, in general, there’s a real struggle to be discovered or heard. In a sense you have to have a “take no prisoners” attitude about promoting yourself and your work. Can you talk about what your experience has been like?

Wayne: Indeed, one has to “terrorize” friends and acquaintances with news of your book. Or to “bomb” social-networking sites to get the word out. You might even say that I’m currently “holding the editors of the New York Times Book Review hostage, and I’m completely serious, this is no longer a joke playing off various terrorism-related words, and if my demands are not met within 24 hours...”

There’s a fine line between promoting yourself and distastefully chasing after notice. After a point, it becomes less about your work and more about you, and I think that difference is evident to astute observers. Then again, the people who are most brazenly exhibitionistic do get more exposure, for better or worse. I’m of the Conan O’Brien mind that if you do good work and are good to others, people will respond. (I did, however, recently and reluctantly acquiesce to Twitter.)

As for the future of publishing, I’m mostly pessimistic. There will always be serious readers, but they’ll be further ghettoized. On the other hand, e-books will eventually democratize the process, as Web sites like the Rumpus are already doing. If you’ve ever wanted to get published in some form, there’s never been a better time. If you’ve ever wanted to get paid for something you’ve published, there’s never been a worse time. (These are Dickensian times, in more ways than one.)

Goodwillie: Teddy’s pretty much right on with his assessment. Most literary authors would love to pull back a heavy curtain every three or four years, place their book on a pedestal, then retreat, pulling the curtain closed behind them. A few – DeLillo, Pynchon, McCarthy – still can, and do, but the rest of us mortals have to run around on stage holding the damn thing up while spotlight dips and dives every which way. (I realize this metaphor expired a few lines ago and I apologize.)

I have also agreed, reluctantly, to use Facebook and Twitter and anything else that holds out the possibility of spreading the word slightly farther than it might otherwise go, and of course it’s all hideously contrived and, I fear, pretty much useless. Books catch on or they don’t. Good reviews help a little bit. So do bookstore placement and print runs and advertising and a dozen other things that are pretty much out of an author’s control. The process still works, barely, and good books somehow still get noticed, though discerning readers and reviewers are more responsible for this than publishers, who, with a few exceptions – like mine of course – will pretty much publish anything if they think it might sell.

I will say it's nice to have a novel out there this time around. My first book was a memoir, and I never felt completely comfortable waving it around up there on that stage—pimping out the story of my life and everyone in it in the name of literature. Of course, compared to the rest of the reality-based entertainment world—"The Jersey Shore," "The Housewives of New York,"—my dalliance with self-analysis was probably just fine. I don't know. The world's a weird to place to be living in these days for anyone who thinks about it very much

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