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Cultural commentator and novelist James Hannaham was not at a loss for words, when asked to preach the gospel of his new book, his writing practice and his corporate foes.

JD: What was the initial inspiration for God Says No and how did the title emerge?



JH: Tough to say what "the" initial inspiration was. It seems more accurate to say that there were a few rather strong impulses that came together in one place. The strongest was probably my desire to write a book-length version of an "ex-gay" testimonial, one of those brief biographies of people who claim to have been "cured" of their homosexuality. They're really odd documents, founded in something I don't at all believe in. They tell fantastic tales of people suffering from alienation from their community and from God, whose lives are transformed by visions of Christ and who then claim to have altered their innermost desires, which I just don't think is healthy or possible, unless you're bisexual and you repress the desire for your own gender. I suppose it's a journey that goes from repression to repression with a side of self-satisfied religious belief. The title is from a quote I read in an interview with an ex-ex-gay, someone who recovered from the recovery.

JD: How did you find the tone/voice?

JH: Revision, mostly. The tone/voice was more important to hone than anything else, and a difficult one to find, because, well, Southern voices don't translate well into literary fiction. In reality some folks down there are so much larger than life and colorful in their speech that the harder you try for "accuracy," the less credible you sound in print. And for a Northerner (Southern roots notwithstanding) to attempt this borders on blasphemy. But I love blasphemy. So I had to arrive at a sort of compromise, a voice that rang true without going over the top too often. And Gary in particular needed to be a very specific kind of guy, so I had to think hard about how he talks, what words he'd use. He's a simple fellow, but it isn't so interesting to read the simple thoughts of a simple fellow, so I did a lot of what I called "Bill Clintonizing." I'd take any ideas that seemed to complex or philosophical for Gary and distill them into down-home language. In short, it was a real bear.

JD: Do readers respond most to the subject matter or the writing itself?

JH: How am I supposed to know that? For that matter, how are readers supposed to know? Is this some kind of trick question? How does "the subject matter" differ from "the writing itself"? I'm not sure there's a difference between "the subject matter" and "the writing itself." Do you mean, are people freaked out about the fact that there's gay sex in the book more than they are invested in the story? Well, I should hope that if they're squeamish, "the writing itself" will keep them reading despite any homophobic misgivings. Ha ha ha ha!

JD: Let's hope so! What's your writing practice/schedule like?

JH: I arise every morning at 4am and mainline a double espresso. I then chain myself to my desk and duct tape my palms to the fingerboard of my computer. I give myself one hour in which to write 5,000 words, even if that's only one word repeated many times—"Ocelot ocelot ocelot," and so on. If I fail to achieve my daily wordcount, I punish myself by dragging a broken beer bottle across my chest and submerging my head in ice water until just before I pass out. Oh, actually it's nothing like that.

JD: But maybe you should try it sometime. So, who are the writers who have most influenced you?

JH: This is something I'd rather let someone else figure out. I admire a lot of writers but I'm not sure how to tell if their influence is positive; I mean, for example, I like Flannery O'Connor a great deal, but what if my attempts at absorbing her work actually make my work worse? But here's a list of people I've tried most shamelessly to rip off: Thom Jones, Toni Morrison, Sherwood Anderson, Lydia Millet, Yukio Mishima, Halldór Laxness, Susan Steinberg (though little of that has been published), Stephen Dunn, Ron Padgett. There's also a host of writers whose success I resent and who inspire me to attempt to drown out their voices, but I won't give you that list right now.

About Unabashedly Bookish

Unabashedly Bookish features new articles every day from the Book Clubs staff, guest authors, and friends on hot topics in the world of books, language, writing, and publishing. From trends in the publishing business to updates on genre fiction fan communities, from fun lessons on grammar to reflections on literature in our personal lives, this blog is the best source for your daily dose of all things bookish.

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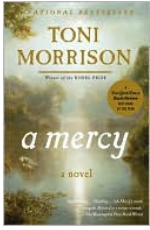
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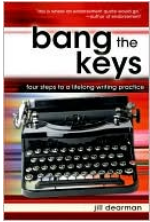
JD: Could you tell us about your next project?

JH: No, not really. I mean, I'd like to publish a story collection next, because I have a few stories in the can that would probably go together nicely. But I'm increasingly suspicious of talking about work or showing it in its early stages, especially when institutions want me to tell them about it so they can decide whether to support it. And not in a J.K. Rowling/Stephanie Meyer Everybody's-waiting-for-this-so-I-have-to-keep-it-private kind of way or anything. I'm far more inclined to believe that no one is waiting for my next anything. Well, maybe my friends Daniel Clymer and Clarinda Mac Low are waiting. I know this runs counter to everything we believe about the arts in the USA, but there's something off-putting to me about allowing institutions to weigh in on works-in-progress. Is there something threatening about an artist showing previous finished work to a funder or a fellowship or a publisher and saying, "I'd like to do something similar to this. But

hopefully better." Why do they need to know what you're planning? So they can avoid funding anything too edgy? Too often those institutions are in bed with, say, corporations, the aims of the majority of which run counter to what I think the aims of literary fiction ought to be. Is that what people want? Corporate literary fiction? Am I too late to be making this argument? Am I crazy to think that a Barnes & Noble website will publish it?

JD: Not at all! Well, hope you will all fire up your espresso machines and dedicate your decade - or for God's sake at least this fall (!) to creation, revision, and caffeine. For more on James Hannaham visit his site: <http://www.jameshannaham.com/>

And for more writerly chat stop by <http://www.bangthekeys.com>, or pick up my new book



[Bang the Keys](http://www.bangthekeys.com) for a writerly jolt of energy. Till next time ...

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