

INTERVIEWS



Death By Ink

[photo animations available online only]

NICK FLYNN

Nick Flynn is a poet, playwright and memoirist. His critically-acclaimed first memoir about meeting his estranged homeless father while working at a Boston shelter, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, has recently been followed up with a second: *The Ticking is the Bomb*, a hallucinatory whirlwind of a memoir, which centers around Flynn's reaction to the Abu Ghraib photographs. John Waters (yes, *that* John Waters) said of it, "Reading this book is like experiencing a very skilled surgeon performing an operation on his own insecurities and new found fragile security. The written operation may be painful but watching the scars heal on the page is a true delight." Flynn spoke via telephone from his Houston home with essays editor Sandra Allen.

Sandra Allen, Wag's Revue: There was a potential generic risk you were taking with Another Bullshit Night when you chose to write a story that you knew well as a memoir as opposed to a first novel. I think a lot of people in your position would have written something fictional based (however closely) upon your experiences, and I think what you've done is commendable. What attracted you to the memoir form?

Nick Flynn: I never really considered writing it as a novel. Actually, that idea really horrified me. I worked with the homeless for many years and my father ended up homeless for several years and the idea that I would take that and use that as material for a novel felt very wrong. It felt more wrong than writing a memoir.

I had written about my father being homeless in my first book of poems, but I found that many people considered the homeless father in those poems to be an artifice—not dismiss the poems necessarily, the poems, whether good or bad, are what they are—but people could dismiss the subject as being a conceit,

assuming that I had created this character of a homeless father. Poetry is a transformative art, so it's understandable that people might assume that. To me, though, the idea of appropriating someone else's suffering—the suffering of a homeless person, in this case—and turn that suffering into a metaphor for my relationship with my father, made me very uneasy. Writers do that all the time, write about suffering that they haven't experienced themselves, but there was something about me having actually been through that experience that made it particularly uncomfortable for me. So it seemed important to wrestle with what actually happened.

Doing that, wrestling with what actually happened, I found that to be thrilling, in a way that I hadn't found to be the case when I tried to write fiction (it could be that I'm just lousy at writing fiction). For me, being forced to wrestle with what happened gives memoir, non-fiction a form, a form that you are forced to bump against. It creates an automatic tension within the work, which, you know, isn't missing from *all* fiction, but I think it doesn't necessarily *have* to be in fiction, that tension between something that happened in the world and your interpretation, your imagination, your speculation upon it. That's why if you don't actually honor what happened, the memoir falls apart, it doesn't have any life to it, it doesn't have any energy, the energy of wrestling with the physics of the world.

SA: But when you're depicting someone you know, do you worry about how that person will read what you've written? This idea comes up in your work explicitly, as when in Another Bullshit Night you describe your father's reactions to your depictions of him after he reads your first collection of poems. Or there's the hyperbolic example you give in the same when your mother reads your journals and, in

her suicide note, references the fact that she's read your descriptions of her. Do you think about it? Do you worry about it? Or are you not bothered?

NF: I do fret about what others might feel, but I try to channel that energy into questioning what my intentions might be. If I'm grinding an ax, the intention is likely impure—blinding. The fretting is a signal from the subconscious that I'm in some dangerous, uncertain territory, a place I have to navigate with some sort of integrity, or at least care. I try to always write from a place of compassion, at least what I end up putting out in the world.

But once it's out in the world and how people respond to it, I have absolutely no control over that. I haven't gotten in a whole lot of trouble for what I've put out there, so far, though I'm sure there's been some bruised feelings. If anyone talks to me about it, it can usually be straightened out in three minutes or less. People often get upset more by being left out, and all I can do is point out that everything that ends up in the book, in the end, is meant to serve the book.

As for the thing with my mother reading my notebook, that's something that paralyzed me from writing for many years. It can be read on many levels, but one is a cautionary tale: you shouldn't read other people's notebooks. A notebook is where all the crazy stuff rages, pure id wrestling with pure superego. It's dark, murky territory. A memoir is a very different beast than a notebook, though even in a memoir there is, hopefully, a level of intuitive energy that's almost uncontainable—yet it has been contained.

SA: I want to ask about your form, because it's surprising, it's what makes the experience of reading your memoirs unique.

On a surface level, both of your memoirs are comprised of numerous short (even one page) chapters, each with a sometimes catchy title whose significance is realized in the course of the text that follows. But on the macro level, both of your memoirs do not move chronologically, necessarily, so much as kaleidoscopically. You actually have a stunning description of the form of your first memoir in your second. You're in Rome and you construct an "imaginary city" of pages—"Some of the piles of paper, I imagined, were freestanding buildings, some were clustered into neighborhoods, and some were open space. On the outskirts,

“I sometimes thought of myself as Ishmael, sometimes as Ahab... On my good days I thought of myself as Queequeg.”

of course, were the tenements—abandoned, ramshackled. The spaces between the piles were the roads, the alleyways, the footpaths, the river. The bridge to the other neighborhoods, the bridges out. I'd walk along them, naming each building (tower of man-pretending-not-to-be-homeless), each neighborhood (the heights, the lowlands, the valley of lost names), each passageway (path of those-claiming-happy-childhoods) ...” What caused you to arrange your memoirs in this way? What does it accomplish?

NF: The form of the first book is loosely based on *Moby-Dick*—I'm not sure if Melville created the form, but I got it from him. Short chapters, a play, and lists. This associative movement,

yet located in time and space. It's a very meta text. That form made sense to me, as did the arc of that book. What surprised me when I read it—I first read it when I was writing *Another Bullshit Night*—is that the book's called *Moby-Dick*, which is the mythic whale, but this whale only appears at the very end of the book, for half a page. It rises up and pulls Ahab down. In writing *Another Bullshit Night* I didn't think of myself as Ishmael, necessarily—sometimes I thought of myself as Ishmael, and sometimes as Ahab, and sometimes as the White Whale. Sometimes, on good days, I was Queequeg.

But this idea, of chasing a phantom that somehow has done some harm to you, it resonated with how I felt when I was with my father. I was circling around him, this mystery, and it became an obsession of mine to understand him. In the end I don't know if I understand him any better than I did at the beginning, but I've gone through a journey. Compared with *The Ticking is the Bomb*, *Another Bullshit Night* feels like much more of a journey, a chronology—an almost conventional narrative. It takes place in time and space, in the homeless shelter, for the most part, for those years I was there. Each passage that ended up in the book has a connection with that thru-line, even if the connection is somewhat associative. It has an almost Aristotelian arc to it, compared to *The Ticking is the Bomb*.

SA: There is a conventional narrative, but the experience of reading it is that you actually tell the end at the beginning, in a way, and there's a building picture—things get known, and known better, and know better, you know what I mean?

NF: I hope it works that way.

SA: And you do time travel, you know, quite a bit.

NF: *The Ticking is the Bomb* is actually where it gets weird. It's much more intuitive, it's much less obsessive. I wanted it to be more of a meditative project. They feel like very different books. On the surface, like you say, they have a similar look—these short pages, catchy titles. *Another Bullshit Night* is like a train, you get on a train at the beginning and you ride it to the end. *The Ticking is the Bomb* is quite different. Many people, well, the three people who've told me about their experience reading the book, have told me that you're not sure actually what's happening for the first ten pages. They wonder, 'Is this going to work? It's all over the place'.

SA: *Yeah.*

NF: I have a sense, though, or maybe just a desperate hope, that if one stays with it, if one starts to pick up the threads that seem scattered about, and follow them, at a certain point, you'll get it. Which is what I hope people will do.

SA: *That makes sense, that at the beginning of The Ticking is the Bomb you're almost teaching the reader how to read it. It takes a little while, but then I got used to how far I'd travel from one section to the next.*

NF: I think of it as a constellation of images. Again, at the core, just like *Moby-Dick*, there's a central mystery—maybe mystery is at the center of everything. At some point, in the writing, I began to think of it as a planet, as a ball of energy. On the surface of this planet are various images—monkeys, photographs, hotel rooms, oceans, prisons, etc—some of them clustered together, some off by themselves. Each image is connected by a thread to all the other images, and they all lead the core, the central mystery. The whole book feels spherical, to me.

SA: Like a bomb.

NF: I guess like a bomb. I didn't think of that, but yeah, like a bomb. But the whole point is that the bomb never goes off, so it becomes more about the fear of the bomb. About how fear has come to control us, and justified the acting out of our darker impulses.

SA: *An issue in memoir writing is that of disclosure. Your work comes off as being not only personal but really honest, to the extent that there's the potential a reader could not like the Nick Flynn narrator. An example of that in Another Bullshit Night is how you're describing your father's intense alcoholism while also perhaps hypocritically disclosing your own descent into alcohol and drug abuse. Do you deal with your narrator in your work as a character apart from yourself in order to help make that happen?*

NF: I intentionally wrote both memoirs in that way so people can have their own experience with it, and with the Nick Flynn who appears as a narrator in each. People have said to me that my father, in *Another Bullshit Night*, seems like a really great guy, someone they'd like to have a drink with. Others say 'your father's a nightmare'. One guy said about *The Ticking is the Bomb*, 'the whole book's about women', and then I just did an interview on NPR where the whole book was about torture. It's interesting what rises to the surface for someone when they read it, and that's fine with me. It's like a Rorschach test. It's all projection.

When writing a memoir, one of the things you have to do, the poet Brenda Hillman said—she was talking about poetry—is you start with the autobiographical, then, as you push deeper, you move into the universal, and as you continue to push (maybe *push* is the wrong word—it doesn't sound like

Brenda—maybe the word is *follow*) you pass into a deeper mystery. Writing a memoir can seem a very self-centered, self-indulgent project, but this is only the scratching the surface—it has to transform into something larger, it has to, in the end, contain as little ego as possible, in order to get into the deeper mystery. Once you cross into that place, it allows for these projections to happen in this way that I think makes things interesting.

On a side note, I think it's interesting that you use the words 'hypocritical descent into alcohol and drug abuse'. I've never heard addiction described that way, as a 'hypocritical descent'. I didn't think of my descent as hypocritical. Or if it was, it was the least of my problems.

*SA: I think you're right that people are going to see what they want to see in your work. I guess what I meant by that question was how, in *Bullshit Night*, you are concerned about and critical of what your father is doing to himself. There is a lot of language about blaming the drug. On the other hand you are detailing a lot of your own similar problems. I thought that was an example of something you were doing that was, well, brave. And with *The Ticking is the Bomb*, you do the same with being very upfront about your sexual life, even infidelities.*

NF: I tried not to be too critical of my father's alcoholism, but to simply present the situation, almost devoid of judgement, though I'm sure some, or a lot, of judgement leaked through. It's more interesting, to me, and seems more true to life, the way intense emotions get misdirected—one of the few times I express anger in *Another Bullshit Night* is toward a little girl I see pointing at my father as he pisses drunkenly in the Charles River.

“It’s seemingly a very self-indulgent act to write a memoir—but it has to be done with as little ego as possible.”

And I don’t know if I’d ever blame drugs or alcohol for addiction—wine seems like one of God’s gifts. I love wine. I just drank up my fair share early on.

As for sex in *The Ticking is the Bomb*, a lot of people may think the representations are a little tame. Again, I think it depends on who you are. As for ‘infidelities’, did I give a lot of attention to infidelity? I think a lot of it’s about being in love with two women, which isn’t exactly an infidelity. It’s in another, maybe more complicated, realm—

SA: Complicated and really personal. You’re getting into really personal things that many people wouldn’t want to divulge to a room full of strangers.

NF: I try to stay out of those rooms full of strangers these days. But isn’t that the thing with memoir? Isn’t that one of it’s job descriptions, that we’re to go into dark, dark places? We’re to go into the places that other people aren’t comfortable going into, or talking about. The reason we do it is because there is an entire realm of humanity that’s suppressed and not discussed, but it’s a huge part of our lives. It’s funny to say that you struggled to like me in *Another Bullshit Night*, because I’m a goddamned hero in that book compared to *The Ticking is the Bomb*. I’m a blameless child in that book and in *The Ticking is the Bomb* I have agency. It’s a very different stance. But neither of them is completely true. I could have

written *Another Bullshit Night* from a totally non-victim stance, you know, and I could have written the *Ticking is the Bomb* presenting myself as a goddamn Bodhisatva. Both those selves exist in our lives all the time, running parallel.

With *The Ticking is the Bomb*, that's what I mean when I refer to 'the universal' and 'the deeper mystery'. That book is all about dragging the darker impulses that we all carry into the light, using myself as a representative subject. So, of course, I would come off as having a harder edge, because we're talking about torture and where that impulse comes from. Our job as memoirists is to push into these places that other people have a hard time going to. The Nick Flynn in the book is there to serve the book, so it doesn't matter to me what people think about him. The purpose of writing a memoir is not so that people end up knowing who I am, but simply for them to have their own experience with the book. You're not going to know who I am from these books.

SA: *Does it bug you that people will think that they do?*

NF: No, no, not at all. I think it's great. I do it myself, all the time. I think I know Buster Keaton really well, you know, but I don't, really, and it doesn't matter. I get something out of the connection I have with Buster Keaton. It doesn't really matter if it's true or not. I don't think it hurts him.

SA: *In The Ticking is the Bomb, you're not only a memoirist, you're also a reporter. You're using reporting techniques and memoir form, straddling that boundary.*

NF: That book started out as a series of long poems that were running parallel with all this research. As I wrote the research out, it felt dead, didactic. I have a self-righteous didactic streak that I have to keep in check, you know, that liberal mentality

that says, 'I know what's right.' I can be very prescriptive, but as soon as the words come out of my mind, I say, 'Do I really believe that? Do I really know what to do?' I was much more so in my twenties, I certainly knew how the world should work, back then, and I've gotten less and less so.

With this book I had to do a lot of research up front, which led me to a lot of people, and a lot of interviews. I talked to human rights lawyers and psychologists who specialized in post-torture trauma and ex-military personnel and ex-detainees of Abu Ghraib, and they all had a certain take on things. I'd synthesized and integrated what they told me into my thinking. It seemed there were certain ways that a poet would interpret the situation that were different than how, say, a lawyer would see it. A different perspective on the material. But it was really important to have the facts solid for the book.

It's not the first time I did research for a book. I did it with *Another Bullshit Night*, but it came at the end of my writing, rather than at the beginning. And I did a lot of research on honeybees, for another book, a book of poems called *Blind Huber*. I enjoyed it, I enjoyed wrestling with the physics of the world, seeing some unbelievable patterns and beauty. That's the deeper mystery, a thing much bigger than any one person. The research can help get to that place, so you can at least get a glimpse of it.

SA: Your work is experimental in form but it's also very legible. I appreciate this quality because right now the avant-garde essay is very popular, and I sometimes fear that poor writing can be disguised by the esoteric (not with the great writers who do this, of course). How do you balance experimentation while still paying service to your reader?

NF: People have been experimenting with language for as long as there's been language. It's a volatile substance, language. I don't think we should take it for granted. That's always in my mind as I'm working.

But the other thing is how to maintain tension in work, which is what holds it together. One is that tension balance between experimentation and legibility, as you said. And I actually do think that creates a pulse in the work, it forces you to ask yourself why you're being experimental, what it's serving, what it's for. Another thing is: I have this great sense of respect for readers' intelligence. Like anyone, I'll sit and watch big dumb Hollywood movies with things blowing up, but that isn't what feeds me. That isn't when I'm fully alive—that's when I'm choosing to shut up, shut down. What I try to do, and what the work that I respect does, is it requires an active participation from the reader.

SA: I wanted to ask about the relationship between the two memoirs, specifically about the overlap of content. There are back stories, anecdotes, even big ideas that are repeated from the first in the second. And while not every reader in the world will have read Another Bullshit Night before they read The Ticking is the Bomb, I would venture a guess that many people would have. This got me thinking about this idea of the mortality of nonfiction content. Nonfiction writers, I think, have a pressure put upon them, maybe more than poets or fiction writers, to not recycle or reuse information that they've already written

“You take off the monkey mask and there's your father.”

about. Are you unafraid of re-approaching a topic from a new perspective in a new work?

NF: Obviously not. [Laughs] Well, it's not obvious, because I could be afraid and still do it, and I did have trepidation in doing it, which I've learned is a signal that I should keep doing it. Anytime that a strong emotional energy starts to vibrate one should pay attention to it, I think—you're tapping into the subconscious. And that's the whole project, with this kind of work. You're wrestling with not only what actually happened, but also your individual subconscious mind or soul or body or whatever—all three, hopefully.

We all have this constellation of images that are floating around us. Maybe one thinks they'll be used up when you write a book and now you can move on. Put that image down and new ones will take their place. But then you'll realize that they're wearing masks. You take off the monkey mask and there's your father.

In *The Ticking is the Bomb*, there's not just the first memoir that is referenced, there's a whole library in there, all the books I was reading that for some reason snagged on my subconscious. The books you read, the music you listen to, the people you're with, they become your life, and it feels actually falser to put them aside and say 'I'm going to ignore that. I'm going to write a memoir, but I'm going to pretend that all my concerns that are in my earlier memoir don't exist anymore.' That seems actually more of a self-consciously artificial stance. I think there's room for all of it.

SA: I guess what strikes me most about your work, in terms of memoir coming into its own, is you've pointed out that it's kind of silly to arrange experience into a straight, linear

fashion, as traditional novels and the bulk of memoirs currently do. Your works are these trips into the experience of trying to understand a whole lot of things. I think you render it in an interesting way. My question is: when another writer writes a memoir in a form like yours, do you think they should call it a Nick Flynn?

NF: Yes. No. No, because it's not my form. It's a borrowed form. They should call it a Melville. They should call it a James Joyce.

SA: *I wonder if something that your form accomplishes is to resist summarization. I think with memoir more often than with poetry or fiction, people go, 'Oh, what's your book about?' Are you bothered by that? Or do you think, that's okay, that if people really want to know what your book is about they'll sit down and read it?*

NF: Unfortunately, if I summarize either of the books I don't really think anyone's going to want to read them. One's about my homeless father and the other's about my obsession with torture. Neither one of those is going to fly off the shelves. So there's certainly a resistance to summarizing. And yet you've got to talk about the book, you have to say what it's about. Fortunately a baby appeared in *The Ticking is the Bomb*, and so I can hold her up to distract people.

SA: *Do you think that part of the reason you employ an experimental form is to force people away from those kinds of summarizations? The Ticking is the Bomb isn't a book about torture where you sit down and get 'Chapter One, Torture Was Invented', you know?*

NF: Hopefully people won't be able to summarize it after they finish it. I hope it will have been an active experience. That

said, there's almost no book that you pick up that you haven't already summarized in some way. It's just part of the nature of the object. You pick it up, you look at the back, you look at the picture, you look at the title, you get information, and you decide if you're going to continue. You may even read the first page, but hopefully by the first page you'll get a sense that maybe this is something that you're interested in for reasons besides the subject. Though I do read nonfiction books that are basically about a subject of interest to me, I do that. Without as much joy, perhaps.

SA: Or memoirists or essayists in particular, to research torture or to research bees, or whatever it is, we still use that really information-centric stuff too.

NF: You know, when researching the bees, the book I got the most out of was called Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee*, which was published about a hundred years ago. It's lyric and Victorian and amazingly good. Completely impressionistic and yet it has all the facts down about bees. With *The Ticking is the Bomb* I probably got as much out of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* as I did from Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side*. Yet I couldn't have written it without the influence of both.

SA: I am interested in the potential of the memoir to reach outward. Memoirists are often (too easily) criticized as being navel-gazers. On the one hand, you've got reporting, which denies the self, reaches out, and tries to objectivize, and on the other, you've got memoir, which is looking in. The Ticking is the Bomb could almost be read as an argument for the fact that that divide is false, that to attempt to contemplate torture, to go to Istanbul and watch the interview process of detainees who were tortured by America, can't be separated from the experience of being a particular human.

NF: Someone who taught me a lot about that is the poet Claudia Rankine and her form. Her last book was *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*—the whole book is on that divide. It came out in 2004, we'd already had four years of Bush, and for many of us a huge amount of energy was going into tracking his every move, and banging our heads against the wall, and it all ended up in the poems. Snippets of things she read in the newspaper, and things she saw on CNN, things she blogged, things she saw on the Internet, all ended up in the poems. She created a character, an "I", who navigates all these concerns, as well as the concerns of the interior life, the effects of all this noise on an individual. It made a lot of sense to me. It was very influential.

SA: *I'm going to ask, if you don't mind, about literary quarterlies, because being an online publication it's something we're always thinking about. You're faculty editor of the estimable print publication Gulf Coast. Do you have any thoughts about how the literary quarterly is changing right now, maybe because of the Internet, or because the troubles that print is encountering in general?*

“I was going to burn the books. I was going to film it, redo *Fahrenheit 451*.”

NF: Lately I've been thinking that the Kindle might not be a disaster. There's tons of books a year that I think would be totally fine on a Kindle, because they are meant to be consumed passively, that are not actually concerned with 'the book as object'. They don't care about it, it's not their concern, they'd be fine on a Kindle, they'd be fine on the Web. They use language as merely a means of

passing on information, or as a way to kill time. Then there are some books that do wrestle with the idea of language as a substance, or the book as an object. That wrestle with the almost mystical elements of language. I think a lot of literary magazines do that, and a lot of poetry. But there are mystical elements to the Internet as well. I think it'll work out, you know, I really think it'll work out.

SA: You're the first literary editor who I've ever heard express that. Most are like, 'save print!'

NF: I bought this house in 2003 in upstate New York that I talk about in the memoir [*Another Bullshit Night*]. It was an eleven-room Victorian, the owner, the seller, had been there for twenty years or so. He'd been selling books on eBay for the previous six years, and each room was dedicated to a different genre. There was a romance room, there was a science fiction room. Each room of the house was jammed with books on little plastic bookcases that went to the ceiling. In some ways he was a deeply dysfunctional guy, like all of us, but his thing was that he just couldn't get out of the house, he couldn't leave. He had a place to go that was better for him, he had an apartment and yet he couldn't get his stuff out of the house. And after a month or two of me sleeping on a friend's couch he called and asked, 'Can I just ask you one favor? Can I leave my books in the house?' I said, 'Your books? You have to understand that books was all there was in the house. 10,000 books. A nightmare for a writer: all these books that nobody wanted. Even if it was a good author, even if it was a great author, it was the worst book they ever wrote. Saul Bellow, but it'd be the Saul Bellow that nobody wanted to read. Thousands of these. I put them in boxes and filled up one entire room with them, until finally, a year or two into it, I convinced the local prison to take them. Before the prison,

for awhile, I thought I'd burn them, I thought I'd film it, a remake of *Fahrenheit 451*. The books were worthless, totally worthless. Mountains of them, mountains of these books. I would have loved to have gone into that house and found just one Kindle on the floor.

SA: A 'wag' is an old fashioned word for a wit, a joker. Who is your favorite wag—from your life, history, literature, imagination, whatever—and why?

NF: I only get one? I only get one wag?

SA: People have given more than one in the past.

NF: The people I laugh with are close friends. It'd have to be these friends, or a few of them. I'd have to say Doug Montgomery. Shane Dubow. Alex Lemon. Rebecca Wolff. I don't really get jokes, usually. Jokes drive me insane. But I laugh very hard with my friends. We don't really tell each other jokes. We riff on the moment.