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Interview with Matthew Batt

Matt is the author of *Sugarhouse*, out now with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. It’s the harrowing story of renovating a Salt Lake City crack house and his life along with it. It’s a very serious book. No really, it is. Except for the funny parts.

His fiction, creative nonfiction, and reviews have appeared in *Tin House*, *The Huffington Post*, *Mid-American Review*, *fifth Wednesday*, *Quarterly West*, *Western Humanities Revies*, *Woundings East*, *The Isthmus*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Salt Lake Magazine*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and in the anthropology *Food & Booze: A Tin House Literary Feast*, which the LA Times said was “Pure fun, pure joy, every last honey-colored 80-proof, diet-be-damned every one of them.”

And he’s almost finished with *The Enthusiast*, a collection of compulsive essays about obsessive subjects: baking sourdough bread, fixed-gear cycling, rock climbing, spelunking in third-world countries, beef-eating, parenting, and other fairly unreasonable things.

INSCAPE: How would you describe your personal writing style?

MATTHEW BATT: I would say a little bit recklessly obsessive. I find this style is what I’m better at. Some people are really good at restraint. They write like people setting fine jewels, and you don’t do that with a wad of mud and a slingshot. You need a jeweler’s loop and tweezers, I guess, but I find that I really need to be able to give myself permission to do really indulgent, messy drafts and then to revise twenty or thirty times. If I don’t, it remains an unrepentant
mess, but I don’t mind that. I like that it puts me in a position where I never feel like I have writer’s block or could even get it. I know that whatever I’m putting onto the page may or may not be good, but it’s more so through the revision than in that first act.

INSCAPE: What was it like to make the transition from writing short stories to a full book?

MB: I definitely started out as more of a short story writer, and I really struggled for a long time to write in a way that I could fully recognize myself in my writing. I always felt like the literary equivalent of a cover song; I could hit the notes okay, but it just didn’t feel like me. And then I think it was in really the first couple of chapters of writing this book where I finally started to recognize myself in print. I was doing them episodically, not really with a book project in mind. But then I was given the advice—one of those tacky, publishing marketplace pieces of advice I wouldn’t necessarily give to most of my students, but I felt like I needed to hear it at the time—which was: you either can make a collection of essays, or you can make a book. I decided I wanted to make a book, so I worked for a long time to take them from episodic, singularly focused essays into threads that run throughout. It was definitely a super challenging thing, but I think ultimately it made a big difference.

INSCAPE: What part of the writing process do you enjoy the most?
MB: I think probably the first drafts. Especially when I’m into something that I know I just need to get the whole thing on the page, I really like writing a big piece of something in as close to one sitting as possible, so sometimes it’s a big fifteen or twenty page chapter in one big day. And then it’s just a complete wreck and it takes months to untangle or make some kind of sense of it, but those are fun. Those really make you feel you’re a writer and not just an editor. I really like that a lot.

INSCAPE: Do you try to convey specific themes or messages while you’re writing, or do you just kind of go with the flow and see what happens?

MB: Definitely not in a premeditated sort of way. I really love the French definition of the word ‘essay.’ In French it’s a verb and it means: to endeavor, to try, to attempt. I think it can be a noun too, but I like the fact that it’s a verb and it’s more of a stance of engagement with your work. I try to do that, and bear in mind that I’m hopefully taking on a subject that I haven’t mastered or even fully understood why I’m writing about it, and for me that gives me a reason to care and to explore it. I know, a lot of great writers know the end before they start, but for me it’s much more “getting the old pith helmet,” and I’m Indiana Jones and I’m exploring. It’s fun for me. I don’t really have a pith helmet, but I’d like one.