

Taft Summer Research Fellowship Cover Sheet

Date of Application: 1/28/13

Name, Department, Rank: Chris Bachelder, English,
Associate Professor

Time Period: Summer 2013

Location: Cincinnati

Title of Project: *The Throwback Special* (novel)

Requested Research Supplement (if any): \$0

Probable Results of a Grant (such as external funding, publications, and presentations): Eventual publication of novel

Other Funding Applied For or Received for This Project (list source and amounts requested and awarded):

To support my writing I plan to apply for an NEA Literature Fellowship (\$25,000, deadline Feb. 28, notification December), as well as a Sustainable Arts Foundation Writing Award (\$6,000, deadline Feb. 28, notification June). Both are very competitive.

Taft Grants Received in the Last Five Years: None

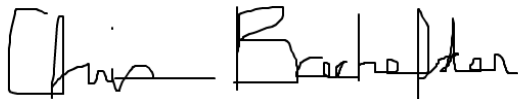
1. Type and Dates:

Amount:

Project Title:

Resulting Publications and Presentations:

Checklist
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Signed Cover Sheet• Project Description (800-1200 words)• Supplement explanation, if necessary• 2 page CV
<i>Review Taft website for full application guidelines.</i>



1/28/13

1

* **Note:** this grant is for non-teaching quarters without pay and leave quarters without pay. *

Chris Bachelder
Taft Summer Research Fellowship Proposal
Project: *The Throwback Special* (a novel)

In the summer I typically teach fiction writing at the Sewanee School of Letters, a low-residential MFA program at the University of the South. This summer, however, I am taking a break from teaching in the hopes of finishing a draft of my novel in progress, *The Throwback Special*. The financial support of a Taft Summer Research Fellowship would help me finish this project, primarily by helping to pay for day camps and child care for my two daughters, ages seven and five.

In fiction workshops, when discussing either published or apprentice work, we typically distinguish between outer story and inner story. The outer story can be thought of as event or plot. Outer story is *what happens*. The inner story, on the other hand, concerns the emotional stakes of the outer story. To whom are the events happening, and why does it matter? The meaning or significance of outer story is not self-evident or universal. A single event (boy meets girl; asteroid imperils the earth; child enters spelling bee) accrues meaning through the vivid particularities of character. Outer story provides inner story with a shape; inner story infuses outer story with emotional depth. An example I use in class: A dog runs into the pages of a story, and rapidly approaches the protagonist. That's outer story. It is a vehicle for significance, but it is not significant in and of itself. The event takes on meaning only when we know that the protagonist, say, has just lost a family dog, or was bitten in the face as a child, or is acutely allergic to dogs, or is pretending to be an animal lover to impress someone, or was raised by a pack of dogs, etc. Ultimately, if the inner story is thin or bland or clichéd, even a vibrant plot can feel dull or manipulative; conversely, if the inner story is rich, a seemingly mundane story can feel extraordinary, or a surreal, fantastical plot can feel deeply human and poignant.

I include this tutorial because the premise of my novel in progress, *The Throwback Special*, might perhaps seem silly or superficial. A group of twenty-two men, most of whom are in their forties, convenes each November to reenact, with obsessive precision, the gruesome, career-ending leg injury of Washington Redskins quarterback Joe Theismann, which occurred during a Monday Night Football game on November 18, 1985. (The play the Redskins ran was a trick play called the "throwback special.") The novel takes place over a cold and rainy weekend, as the men gather for their annual event. They come together in a hotel, they draw names from a helmet to receive their roles in the imminent drama, they study game film of the fateful play, they dress in historically accurate uniforms. They drink, confess, confide. The men are confined in time and space, and this confinement creates a sense of drama, as does the impending main event, the reenactment of explosive violence.

This is the outer story, which I can only hope is compelling in its oddness and perhaps evocative to an American reader of a certain gender and age. But this is not a novel *about* football in any real sense. The value of this premise and plot is that it creates a promising dramatic container that I can fill with the novel's inner story. It is not helpful for working novelists to think too intently about their themes or motifs, but as I see it, the novel's subjects include masculinity, identity, community, ritual, domesticity, fatherhood, nostalgia, and spirituality. The teenaged

boys who in 1985 witnessed Theismann's injury with a sense of terror and exhilaration have now become men with wives, children, aged parents, careers, homes, declining bodies. In their generation, the ideals of masculinity have shifted, and they don't have appropriate models to emulate. They're confused and ambivalent. If asked, they would probably be unable to articulate why they convene annually to reenact this injury, but they do seem to crave the company, the ceremony, the community of fellow men. The weekend is, in more than one sense, a retreat.

The rituals of reenactment provide a structure, a clothesline upon which I can hang episodes that are comic and melancholic in tone. These middle-aged men are expert at the inconsequential and trivial, yet generally bewildered by matters grave and significant. There are two or three characters that I develop carefully, but generally I treat the men as a kind of chorus, and I treat the individual scenes as a way to explore facets of masculinity. (It is of course the case that if there are no women in the room, this book is inescapably about women, as the masculine is defined against the feminine.) In one early scene, one of the men talks to another about his ambivalent reaction to his daughter's broken arm the previous summer. On one hand, he is saddened that he cannot protect her; on the other hand, he is anxious for her to learn that life is full of pain and disappointment. In another scene, a man recounts that almost immediately after new window blinds were installed in his house, his young child pulled the blinds, thus removing herself from his view as he worked in the backyard. As is always the case in fiction, the purpose of these episodes is not to answer questions, but to pose vital questions with precision.

It seems to me that the book is also interested in exploring a few central paradoxes, most of which originate from the various meanings of the word *play*. The play is the basic unit of a football game, and it is also a theatrical presentation. So the men's annual event is, paradoxically, a kind of rehearsed chaos, or a scripted and predetermined exemplum of contingency and chance. The play is a play; the men (struggling with gender *roles*) are playing players in a play that dramatizes a play. In a sense they are also *at play*—relaxing, having fun, gathering nostalgically with other men—and yet there is very little that is playful or fun about Theismann's compound fracture. The context for their meeting is a form of hyper-masculine brutality that is at odds with both their lives and the spirit of their gathering.

By the end of the semester I will have written more than 100 pages of *The Throwback Special*, and I speculate that the completed novel will be roughly 200-225 pages. With a good summer of work, I can imagine finishing a draft of the book. It is difficult to speak of a novel's potential significance in the field of fiction, but I do think this book will be publishable and of interest to readers (and not just men). I have spoken to my agent about the project, and she seems eager to represent the book. I think the novel will fit nicely on a small but expanding shelf of contemporary fiction that is concerned with shifting conceptions of masculinity and fatherhood. I am grateful to the committee for considering my proposal.

CHRIS BACHELDER

EDUCATION

MFA Fiction, University of Florida (2002)

BA English, Virginia Tech (1992)

PUBLICATIONS

—Books

Abbott Awaits (LSU Press 2011)

Foreign edition: Spain

U.S.! A Novel (Bloomsbury USA 2006)

Foreign editions: UK, France

Bear v. Shark: The Novel (Scribner 2001, Scribner Paperback 2002)

Foreign editions: UK, Germany, Italy, Russia

Lessons in Virtual Tour Photography (e-novel from McSweeney's 2004)

—Short Fiction

"A Brief History of Bad Love," *Ink Pot* (Fall 2004)

"A Clarification," *Quick Fiction* (October 2007)

"A Love Letter of Recommendation," *Four Letter Word* (Free Press, 2008)

"Abbott Imagines," *Keyhole* (December 2010)

"Abbott in High Grass," *Subtropics* (Spring/Summer 2010)

"Autograph Night," *Ghost Town* (Summer 2011)

"Blue Knights Bounced from CVD Tourney," *Backwards City Review* (Spring 2005)

(Collected in *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 2006*)

"Blue Knights Fold Like Some Kind of Origami Bird," *Hobart* (Fall 2007)

"City League," *Monkeybicycle* (Winter 2007)

"Conservatory," *storySouth* (Fall 2009)

(Collected in *Best of the Web 2010*)

"Deep Wells, USA," *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* No. 14 (Fall 2004)

(Reprinted in *Harper's*, Jan. 2005)

"Eighth Wonder," *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* No. 32 (Fall 2009)

"Employment History," *Puerto del Sol* (Summer 2003)

"Escort Fore," *Intersection* (UK) (Summer 2003)

"Gatsby's Hydroplane," *Subtropics* (Winter/Spring 2008)

"Georgia and After," *The Oxford American* (May/June 2003)

"Like Dylan at Newport," *The Cincinnati Review* (Summer 2006)

"Lucky Abbott," *The Cincinnati Review* (Summer 2009)

"Maintenance Window," *The Collagist* (August 2009)

"Mattress: Timeline," *The Oxford American* (Winter 2006)

"My Beard, Reviewed," *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* (Nov. 22, 2002)

(Collected in *Created in Darkness by Troubled Americans: The Best of McSweeney's, Humor Category: 1998-2003*, Knopf 2004; collected in *Fakes*, Norton 2012)

"My Son, There Exists Another World Alongside Our Own," *McSweeney's Quarterly*

Concern No. 23 (Spring 2007)

- “Near the End of the Symphony Strike,” *Subtropics* (Winter/Spring 2006)
“Notes Toward a Lay Report on the Joy Debt,” *The Mississippi Review* web edition (Summer 2004)
“On a Difficult Sentence in *Gatsby*,” *American Short Fiction* (Fall/Winter 2007)
“Otherwise Faithful,” *Black Warrior Review* (Spring/Summer 2007)
“Remember the Sabbath Day, to Keep It Holy,” *Another Magazine* (Spring 2003)
“Seasons of Her Life,” *The Lifted Brow* (2008)
“Something Great: A Monologue,” *Another Magazine* (Autumn/Winter 2002)
“The Kudzu League,” *ESPN Magazine* (March 2011)
“The Love Song of Continental Airlines Flight 3389, Nonstop to Houston,” *failbetter.com* (Fall 2004)
“The Princess Doctrine,” *The Massachusetts Review* (Spring 2013)

—**Nonfiction**

- “A Disconcerting Animal,” *The Oxford American* (Music Issue 2006)
(Collected in *The Oxford American Book of Great Music Writing*, University of Arkansas Press, 2008)
“A Soldier Upon a Hard Campaign,” *The Believer* (October 2004)
“At Play in the Fields of Time: The Clockless Stories of Charles D’Ambrosio,” *The Writer’s Chronicle* (May 2008)
“Doctorow’s Brain and Other Special Problems in Literary Realism,” *The Believer* (February 2007)
“Note to a Young Teacher,” *The Massachusetts Review* (2009)
“Seller’s Notes,” *The Oxford American* (Summer 2008)
“That Joke Isn’t Funny Anymore,” *GQ Style* (Spring-Summer 2009)
“That Pecker: Adventures in Domestic Epistemology,” *The Oxford American* (Spring 2006)
“*The Believer* Reading Group Guide for *Bright Lights, Big City*,” *The Believer* (September 2004)
“The Dead Chipmunk: An Interrogation,” *The Believer* (February 2011)
“*The Jungle* at 100,” *Mother Jones* (Jan/Feb 2006)
“The Mulcher,” *The Oxford American* (Winter 2006)
“Toward a Theory of Surprise,” *The Believer* (January 2010)
“When Basketball Imitates Melville” (with Brian McMullen), *The Believer* (Oct 2007)

TEACHING

Associate Professor, University of Cincinnati, 2011 -
Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts, 2009-2011
Assistant Professor, University of Massachusetts, 2006-2009
Fiction Faculty, Sewanee School of Letters, 2010 -
Visiting Lecturer, Amherst College, Spring 2009
Fiction Resident, UNC Greensboro, March 2009
Visiting Writer, Sprint Course on Craft, Miami University, April 2007 and March 2011
Assistant Professor, Colorado College, 2003-06
Visiting Assistant Professor, New Mexico State University, 2002-03