Nathan Blum on Education, Inside and Outside the Classroom

By Deborah Treisman

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Illustration by The New Yorker; Source photograph by Liana Blum

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In your story "Outcomes," two students at a college in Maine—a freshman who grew up nearby and a senior from New York City—meet and form a connection. How did the idea for the story come to you?

What appeared first were fragments of conversation between the main characters, Nolan and Heidi. I'm not sure that those initial lines of dialogue even made it into the final draft; they rarely do. But it was clear from the beginning that they were characters with fundamental differences—not just in who they were and where they were from but in how they perceived themselves and in the way they conceived of their futures. What these differences also meant, though, was that they were characters who had a lot to learn from each other. Once I understood that, the structure of the story began to clarify itself.

At that time, I had another story half written, one I'd been struggling with for years. Perhaps unsurprisingly, my drafting process does not always yield a finished product; I often need to abandon a piece, sometimes more than once, before its final shape emerges. This other story had proven especially difficult to finish, which was likely due to the precariousness and gravity of its subject matter. I still remember the moment when I realized that this other story would provide the ending for the story I was working on—which was also when I understood what

would become of Nolan and Heidi. It was, if you can excuse my vagueness, an emotional moment. That kind of discovery is what I'm after in my writing. I want the events of a story to feel beyond my control. I want, in the end, to be as surprised or delighted or anguished as a reader might be.

The theme of teaching is very present in the story. Nolan is studying education; his parents are teachers. He and Heidi teach each other various skills. Was it important to you to weave that element throughout the story?

I think I could set out to write about pretty much anything, and it would end up being in some way about education. This is probably because I've spent almost my entire life in schools. In addition to nearly two decades as a student, I have taught, at least in some capacity, at the elementary-school, middle-school, high-school, and university level. And yet I don't think the influence of education on my life is all that outsized or unique. I'd bet that everyone I know can name the teacher or teachers who radically changed their life. So it doesn't seem all that wild, when I'm developing characters, to ask questions about their relationship to learning.

Like Nolan, I studied education in college. Studying education is a little like reading an interview about writing: it makes everything seem much more formulaic and straightforward than it really is. The truth is that teaching, like writing, is best learned by doing, and doing in a community—with peers and mentors and systems of feedback and accountability. In the story, Nolan is emerging as a teacher outside of the classroom as well as in it. What he and Heidi have is an education in itself: a connection in which knowledge and insight flow both ways.

Why did you decide to write the story in the present tense?

I rarely use the present tense. But, for a story in which the protagonist's uncertainty about the future is a central subject, it felt a little misleading to write in the past tense, which implies a kind of retrospective narrative—as if the story were being told from a future that already exists.

I became convinced that the present tense was necessary when I reached the story's final section. The end of a good story often feels inevitable. In some of my very favorite stories, which are told in the past tense, the endings are made clear from the beginning. But what happens at the end of this story is not inevitable. It is not implied. It does not need to have happened.

I don't want to spoil the ending for anyone who hasn't read it yet, but it was interesting to me that the moment of the story that is by far the most dramatic and shocking is not described—and happens entirely offstage, so to speak. Why did you make that choice?

It was, for me, a question of point of view. The character through whom we learn what has happened was not there to witness the event. It's possible that I chose that perspective because it is the perspective I can relate to. But I also believe that those who have been close to these kinds of events should not be the only ones tasked with confronting them. Both the character and the reader must face the reality of what has happened. My hope is that the story has done its job and has made that reality as palpable as it should be.

You're currently working on a novel and a story collection. How do you see this story fitting with the others in the collection? Are they linked in any way?

The stories are not explicitly linked. What excites me about story collections is the potential diversity of the works within them. I think the term "story" can be just as open-ended and fluid as the term "novel," if not more so. After many expeditions, I still have not found the outer boundaries of the form.

And yet . . . all the stories in the collection were written by the same person, and so there are a great many reverberations and through lines among them. There are, for instance, quite a few teachers and quite a few students. Many of the stories take place in the Northeast; many feature men and boys; many, somewhat perplexingly, feature bodies of freshwater. And all of the stories are concerned, in some way, with time: the unrelenting speed with which it moves, the inevitable changes it brings. To say that these patterns are "unintentional" seems wrong; a better word might be "emergent." And emerge they did. When I read back, it appears that I could not for the life of me keep them down. ♦