

Poets & Writers

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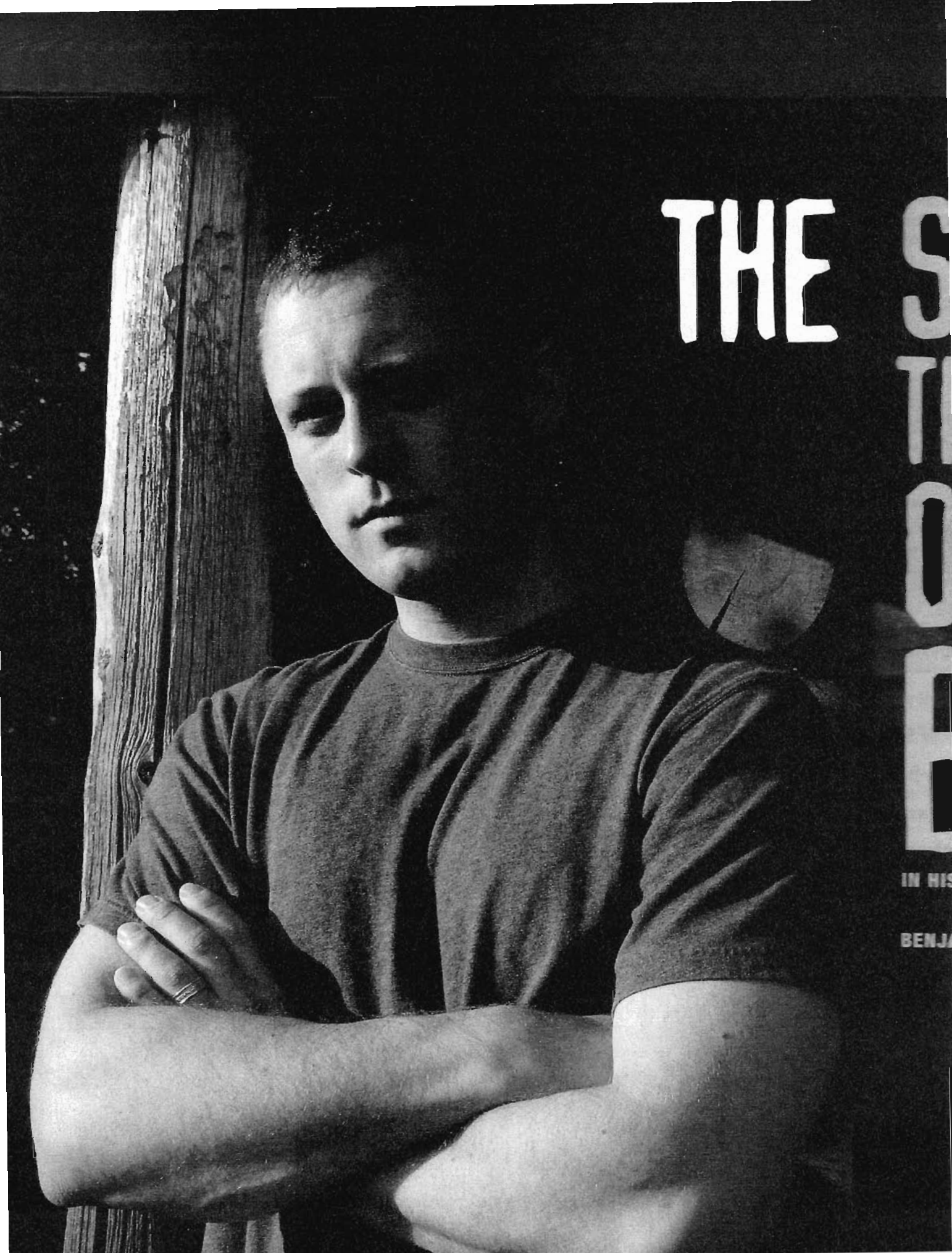
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SADNESS THEY CARRY ON THEIR BACKS

IN HIS SECOND SHORT STORY COLLECTION,
REFRESH, REFRESH, EMERGING WRITER
BENJAMIN PERCY EXPLORES CENTRAL OREGON,
THE HOME FRONT, AND THE
BURDEN OF MASCULINITY.

BY KRIS BABE • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNIFER MAY

LAST March, Benjamin Percy sat in the plush auditorium of Symphony Space in New York City, where New York Public Radio's short story program *Selected Shorts* is recorded for national broadcast. Percy's story "Refresh, Refresh" was one of three stories read that night that had been published in *The Best American Short Stories 2006*, edited by Ann Patchett. When she introduced the story, Patchett called Percy's tale "the story of the year."

Percy listened while actor Ted Marcoux read his words, but he was paying almost as much attention to the audience. "Normally, when you're reading, you're behind a podium," Percy says. "Here I was a spy and could hear the gasps and chuckles. I could see a woman cover her ears during the violent climax of the story. It was an electric sensation being in the middle of all that."

"No one in the room was breathing while this story was being read. It was so powerful," Patchett recalls. When they brought Percy up on stage afterward, "the audience fell apart as if Elvis had come into the room. When you ask yourself, 'Does it count? What can a short story do?'... It felt wonderful to see what a short story could accomplish."

It's not surprising that the audience's reaction was so strong. Since it first appeared in the Winter 2005 issue of the *Paris Review*, "Refresh, Refresh"—now the title story of Percy's second story collection, published by Graywolf Press last month—has met with strong positive reactions, earning the 2006 Pushcart Prize in fiction in addition to being chosen by Patchett as

one of the best stories of 2006. And the *Paris Review* awarded Percy the 2007 Plimpton Prize, a ten-thousand-dollar award for a writer of great promise, named for founder and longtime editor George Plimpton. When Percy got the call that he'd been chosen he had to sit down on his kitchen floor. "I didn't get up for an hour," the twenty-eight-year-old author says, shaking his head as if he still can't quite believe it. And until it was presented to him at the Spring Revel, the magazine's annual awards and fund-raising gala, he "kept expecting to get the 'just kidding' call."

THERE'S no wading into a Benjamin Percy story. Reading the first sentence is like falling off a cliff—you keep going until you hit the inevitable yet surprising end. The stories in his two collections (*The Language of Elk*, published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in 2006, was his first) are set in central Oregon, a bleak and beautiful landscape of mountains, high deserts, caves, and craters, and explore what Percy calls the "burden of masculinity."

"I am interested in this new masculinity in today's society, what distinguishes us as men and as women besides our biology. No longer do men head off into the wilderness to slaughter large animals. No longer do women stay home and tend to the fire and the vitles. It's more about, I don't know, going to the gym and lifting so many weights that your veins rip out of your skin like pencils and your muscles are the size of softballs. It's not earned muscle in that way but why are you doing it? You do it to sort of remember what it used to be to be a man," he says.

What it means to be a man is at the heart of "Refresh, Refresh." Teenager

Josh and his best friend, Gordon, are both coping with the deployment to Iraq of their fathers, along with many other men from their small town's Marine Reserve unit. The boys don't talk about their fears and losses—they pummel each other in a makeshift boxing ring, they career through the Cascade Mountains on their dirt bikes, they exact revenge on school bullies, they defy danger on the treacherous slopes of Hole in the Ground:

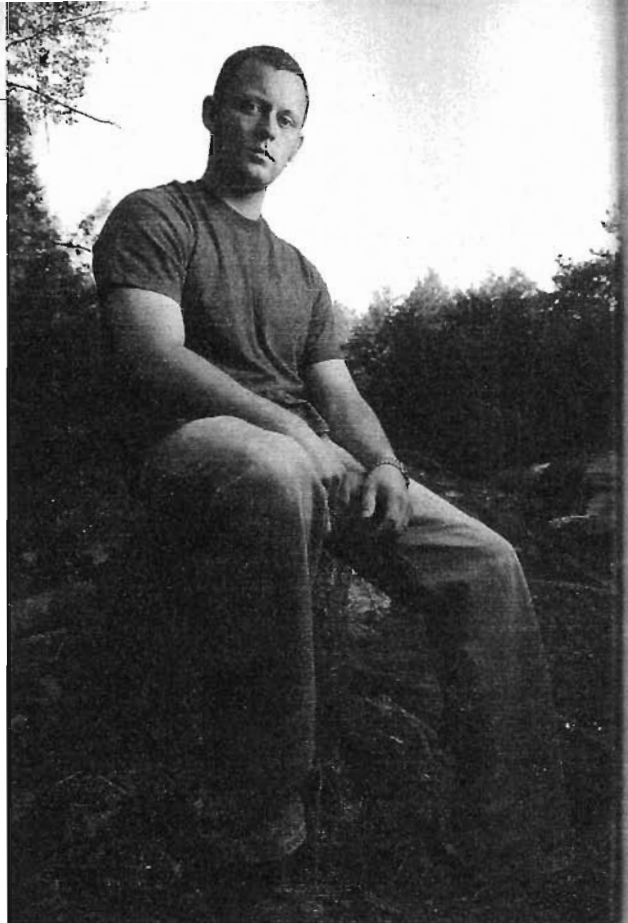
Many years ago a meteor came screeching down from space and left behind a crater five thousand feet wide and three hundred feet deep.... In the near distance the grayish green glow of Tumalo dampened the sky—a reminder of how close we came, fifty years ago, to oblivion. A chunk of space ice or a solar wind at just the right moment could have joggled the meteor sideways, and rather than landing here, it could have landed there, at the intersection of Main and Farwell. No Dairy Queen, no Tumalo High, no 2nd Battalion. It didn't take much imagination to realize how something can drop out of the sky and change everything.

When the local Marine recruiter, who entices teens to enlist and sleeps with the wives of the deployed, arrives on Josh's doorstep wearing a black armband to deliver bad news, presumably about Josh's father, the boys seek retribution at the crater's rim.

"It's the best piece of writing that I'd read about Iraq, whether nonfiction or fiction," says Nathaniel Rich, senior editor of the *Paris Review* and

the first at the magazine to read the story. "We have seen a lot of stories about the war, many not very artful or expressive. This seemed to really capture the experience in a way that I hadn't seen before."

"It was immediately obvious that here was a real writer," says editor Philip Gourevitch. "He had his own voice—varied, rich in emotion, raw." The story is "especially interesting



"I am interested in this new masculinity in today's society, what distinguishes us as men and as women besides our biology. No longer do men head off into the wilderness to slaughter large animals.... It's more about, I don't know, going to the gym and lifting so many weights that your veins rip out of your skin like pencils."

KRIS BABE's writing appears in the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Porcupine Literary Arts Magazine*, *Wisconsin Trails*, the *Writer's Chronicle*, and other magazines. She lives near Milwaukee.

from the perspective of young men and the absence of fathers, coming of age, manhood.... It's saying a lot about where we live and how we live, and some of the writing is exceptionally beautiful and vivid."

GROWING up in Crow, Oregon, Percy never considered being a writer, though he was raised by parents who "always had a book in hand." Like his characters Josh and Gordon, he dreamed of becoming a spy, a Special Forces operative, a Navy Seal. He spent his free time, he says, ranging his parents' hobby farm and the adjoining land with a "slingshot, BB gun, and friends playing war games, smoking cigarettes, burning ants with a magnifying glass, and getting into trouble." On frequent camping trips with his father, who he describes as "a mad hatter of a rock hound," he searched for quartz, geodes, petrified wood, and fossil beds.

In high school, he spent two summers mapping rock-art sites and digging in a Paiute village near Christmas Valley, Oregon, but archeology didn't live up to his *Indiana Jones* fantasies. "Gradually I realized that the world of the mind and fantasy was what I was best at," he says. A high school teacher, newly graduated from Brown University, encouraged Percy to apply there, and he went on to earn a BA in English as well as honors in creative writing.

During college, Percy spent a summer working as a gardener at Glacier National Park in Montana, where he fell for a waitress five years his senior. The "lascivious love letters" he wrote her "must have been good," he laughs, because Lisa—now his wife—suggested he make a career of writing.

"*Letting Loose the Hounds* had a voice I recognized," says Percy, "so I sent Brady Udall an e-mail." Like many who now e-mail Percy, he initially wrote to Udall to say he liked the story

collection and to ask advice about writing, not really expecting a response. But Udall did respond, and encouraged him to apply to the MFA program at Southern Illinois University (SIU), Percy says. He took Udall's advice.

Udall doesn't remember that early encounter, but he does recall Percy as a student. "I've never seen a writer progress so far, and so quickly, as Ben did," he says. "What set Ben apart was his drive. He didn't approach writing as some kind of ethereal exercise, he approached it as work, and he worked hard—harder than any student I've ever seen—to make himself better." Percy earned his MFA in 2004.

If there's praise Percy accepts, it's for his hard work. "There are so many people who are more talented than me, but I think I work harder," he says. "It frustrated me in grad school when I was around all these people who were writing great stories, but they were so timid about sharing them with the world, about sending them off. They received one or two or three rejections and that was it. The story went in the drawer never to see the light of day again. Whereas I would send a story to forty places—no exaggeration. And maybe it's the forty-first place that will finally accept it." He laughs and shakes his head. "I would waste a lot of paper and postage along the way, but I knew that, at least I believed that, the story was strong enough to find its way into one of these...periodicals. I guess that's a mind-set that has been very conducive to this profession." Indeed, his tenacity has paid off: His story "In the Rough," for example, was rejected thirty times, mostly for length, before appearing in the Summer 2007 issue of the *Antioch Review*.

He says he's always had a tough hide when it comes to critique, "a catcher's mitt-sized callous around my heart.... It's natural [for a writer] to have a sensitive disposition, but you have to reserve that for the page, not the business side of writing."

Percy gained valuable perspective on the editorial process while working at

EXCERPT

Refresh, Refresh

My father wore steel-toed boots, Carhartt jeans, a T-shirt advertising some place he had traveled, maybe Yellowstone or Seattle. He looked like someone you might see shopping for motor oil at Bi-Mart. To hide his receding hairline he wore a John Deere cap that laid a shadow across his face. His brown eyes blinked above a considerable nose underlined by a gray mustache. Like me, my father was short and squat, a bulldog. His belly was a swollen bag and his shoulders were broad, good for carrying me during parades, and at fairs, when I was younger. He laughed a lot. He liked game shows. He drank too much beer and smoked too many cigarettes and spent too much time with his buddies, fishing, hunting, bullshitting, which probably had something to do with why my mother divorced him and moved to Boise with a hairdresser/triathlete named Chuck.

At first, when my father left, like all of the other fathers, he would e-mail whenever he could. He would tell me about the heat, the gallons of water he drank every day, the sand that got into everything, the baths he took with baby wipes. He would tell me how safe he was, how very safe. This was when he was stationed in Turkey. Then the 2nd Battalion shipped for Kirkuk, where insurgents and sandstorms attacked almost daily. The e-mails came less and less frequently, with weeks of silence between them.

Sometimes, on the computer, I would hit refresh, refresh, *refresh*, hoping. In October, I received an e-mail that read, "Hi Josh. I'm OK. Don't worry. Do your homework. Love, Dad." I printed it up and hung it on my door with a piece of Scotch tape.

From "Refresh, Refresh" from *Refresh, Refresh* by Benjamin Percy. Copyright © 2007 by Benjamin Percy. Published by Graywolf Press.

SIU's *Crab Orchard Review*. "I learned to write stories that grab the reader with the first sentence and first paragraph. No slow, expository work," he says. He also learned how difficult it is to have one's work accepted. "Decisions are fickle. If the reader has a stomachache or his grandmother just died, no story is going to look good." And if your story is similar to another piece the magazine has already accepted, it doesn't get in even if it's good, he says.

After Percy sold his first collection, *The Language of Elks*, to Carnegie Mellon University Press without an agent, he posted news of the sale on the publishing Web site Publishers Marketplace. "It's one of the best career moves I ever made. Within three hours, I had seventy e-mails," he says, including inquiries from thirty to forty agents. He was able to handpick from among those already interested in representing his work. His choice: Katherine Fausset of the Curtis Brown agency in New York City. "She's been incredible. She's one of the few agents who supports short fiction," he says.

While hard work has helped Percy achieve some of his success, serendipity has also played a role. His roommate at the 2003 Sewanee Writers' Conference was filmmaker James Ponsoldt, and they've kept tabs on each other's careers since. Ponsoldt, whose first film, *Off the Black*, premiered at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival, ran across "Refresh, Refresh" in the *Paris Review* while killing time at a bookstore before seeing a movie. "I wasn't looking for it," Ponsoldt says. "It found me in a crowded bookstore in L.A., and knocked me on my ass, literally." Ponsoldt says he sat on the floor of Skylight Books and read the entire story, missing his movie, and afterward he immediately contacted Percy about optioning "Refresh, Refresh." His script based on the story won him the Lynn Auerbach Screenwriting Fellowship at the 2007 Sundance Screenwriters Lab. He is currently looking for financial backing to make the film.

Percy has been warned by fellow writers to be cautious about film adaptations of his work, but Percy is optimistic. "I think he's brilliant," Percy says of Ponsoldt. Percy has read the script, which Ponsoldt wrote working from Percy's original forty-page draft of the story. "He's come up with a great deal of his own [material]. I really feel like this screenplay is just out of sight."

CAVES, mountains, woods, and surreal geologic wonders like Hole in the Ground set the tone of Percy's fictional world: beautiful, dangerous, indifferent. Atop Sphinx Butte, outside the small town of Cairo, Oregon, the young protagonist of "The Iron Moth" (*The Language of Elk*) resigns himself to the desert of his own lost possibilities; the fantasy of a whale-watching vacation drives the beleaguered institutional investor of "The Faulty Builder" (*Refresh, Refresh*) into the teeth of a gale.

Percy upends the conventions of genre fiction and the results are often profound. No one expects a story that begins like this to be a love story:

This afternoon, a hot August afternoon, the refrigerator bleeds. Two red lines run down the length of it—and then a third, a fourth—oozing from the bottom lip of the freezer. This is what Kevin finds when he returns home from his job at the foundry and flips the light switch repeatedly without success, when he stands in the half-light of the kitchen and says, "Shit."

Yet despite—or perhaps because of—its bats, blood, and the occasional dead animal, "The Caves in Oregon" is an effective and affecting love story. Kevin and his wife, Becca, emotionally estranged following a late miscarriage, find a way back to each other via the cave beneath their house.

Percy has no fear of genre fiction, and plans in the future to explore detective stories, ghost stories, science fiction, and westerns. "His relationship

to the horror genre is one of the most interesting things about him," says award-winning horror writer Peter Straub. "He hasn't been spoiled by his education into thinking that popular forms are to be despised, or looked at askance. Ben's stories are packed to the brim with emotional pain. It's what gives them their strength and real validity." He compares Percy's writing to that of Dan Chaon, author of National Book Award finalist *Among the Missing* (Ballantine, 2001), and Neil Gaiman, author of *American Gods* (Morrow, 2001). Straub included "Unearthed," a story about a grieving widower and amateur archeologist who unearths and becomes attached to the ancient corpse of a Paiute Indian, originally published in *Sycamore Review* and included in Percy's first collection, in the forthcoming horror anthology *Poe's Children*.

Percy believes, unabashedly, in plot. "Stuff happens" in Percy's stories, says Gourevitch, who published "Somebody Is Going to Have to Pay for This," another of Percy's stories with a connection to the Iraq war, in the Spring 2007 issue of the *Paris Review*. Percy conveys emotion powerfully, Gourevitch says. "He's not afraid of it, or ironic about it, or kitschy-nostalgic about it. He gets across what a character might really be feeling. These [characters] may be in the male fiction genre, but there's no strut. They're also not 'crying into the beer' wounded men stories."

Fiona McCrae, publisher of Graywolf, was drawn to Percy's work not just because of the quality of his writing, but because the stories read as if they could only have been set in the twenty-first century. "Ideally, that's what I'm looking for but don't always find," she says, "fiction that takes on the issues of the contemporary world." Several of the stories in *Refresh, Refresh* explore war and its consequences from the home front; another, "Meltdown," is a dystopia set in 2014, in a wasteland created after a nuclear power plant melts down during a 2009 test of anti-terrorism procedures.

"Ben is a scorched-earth, take-no-prisoners kind of writer, and I mean that in a good way," Udall says. "He writes with an aggressiveness and recklessness that I wish I saw more of in today's literary landscape."

PERCY recently completed three years as a visiting assistant professor of English at Milwaukee's Marquette University and has since accepted a tenure-track position at University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. A novel, tentatively titled "The Wilding," is near completion, and in August, he was a fiction fellow at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Foreign rights for *Refresh, Refresh* have already sold to Albin Michel in France and Jonathan Cape, a division of Random House, in Britain. And since the beginning of the year, his work has appeared in the *Antioch Review*, *Esquire*, *Glimmer Train*, the *Missouri Review*, and other publications.

Though he's "not buying too big of a house," Percy is grateful for the success that has already come his way. "I feel very, very fortunate not only to have received recognition in my writing, but to have landed this professorship at Stevens Point," he says. "And not just because I put in all the hours at the keyboard, but because I am able to support my family by doing something that I enjoy." Percy and his wife had their first child in 2006.

The only time Percy struggles for words is when discussing awards and accolades. "*Unreal* is the best word," he says. "I'm from a dinky little town in Oregon, I'm living now in the Midwest, an area many on the East Coast refer to as the 'flyover states,'...so to be acknowledged by this East Coast scene is a little bewildering, like, 'Me?' You know, particularly what I am writing about. 'You're interested in this?'" His eyes widen and he takes a sip of his coffee. "I never expected this reception for my work. It's great inspiration to know that what I am doing is working, and it makes it that much easier to sit down every day and write." ∞