

Interview with Jeff Roberts, author of Little Stories

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Jeff Roberts, who is here to talk about his new book “Little Stories.”

Jeff Roberts graduated with a B.A. in Liberal Studies. His writing has been recently nominated for a William Rockhill Nelson Award, and has been featured in the University of Iowa’s Daily Palette. He currently resides with his family in Kansas City, Missouri.

Tyler: Welcome, Jeff. I’m very intrigued by the content of “Little Stories.” To begin will you explain to our readers the title?

Jeff: Well that is what they are, little stories; the diminutive of big stories. “*War and Peace*” is a big story, “*The Great Gatsby*” or “*Tender is the Night*” are big stories. Those books are a whole life, like watching a movie and take days or weeks to read. What I put out there is simply a family photo album. Sit down with it at my coffee table or your reading chair and look at it. Hopefully, though, you won’t be looking at pictures of me, you’ll be looking at pictures of you. The book itself came out of my work at Iowa as an undergrad; you had to write 5000 words on a story about a bus or pet or something like that, so the medium I was working with small. One of my teachers, Dr. Carol Lauhon got her Ph.D. and went to work at a publishing house a couple of years back so she thought they were worthy of print so I put a first version out to send to my friends as Christmas presents. The feedback was good so I wrote some more stuff to get up to 100 pages and put it out in its current incarnation. I think I might just continually write a few more stories here and there and every couple of years add to them and release newer versions.

Tyler: Who do you feel will be the reading audience for these stories?

Jeff: The reading audience, well, if you’ve ever fell in love, or been betrayed; buried a relative or had a baby; gotten too drunk or made bad decisions I think there’s something in there for you.

Tyler: Will you give us a short summary of your favorite story in the book, without giving away the ending?

Jeff: Hmmm...ask me which of my children is my favorite. Sorry, I can’t do that. What I like the most about the book is the feedback I’ve gotten. Every review lists a favorite story; Kirkus loved “*The Red and the Black*,” but hated “*A Triptych*.” Adrienne Muncy of BookReview.com wrote a review and loved “*A Triptych*,” so what does that tell you? Does a man with two watches ever know what time it is? I did a reading once and afterwards a teary eyed man came up to me and said “*The Red and the Black*” touched him because he’d just buried his dad. At another reading, after I read “*Cosette*” women came up to me also crying saying she loved that story because she’d just buried a pet. My favorite story is which ever one you liked best.

Tyler: Jeff, I’m intrigued by the titles of your stories and am I correct when you said above they were the diminutive of big stories, that they are related to those big stories—is “*The Red and the Black*” connected to Stendhal’s novel of that name, or does “*Cosette*” have anything to do with Victor Hugo’s “*Les Miserables*”? Can you explain a bit more about how this connection to these big classics works? Or am I off-base here?

Jeff: No, you get a prize; you're right on. They all connected through my life. When I got divorced, as the story explores, I actually bought the kids a kitten at the same time I was reading "Les Misérables." We had the pick of the litter, but we chose a tiny runt of a kitten. My daughter and I walked into the pet store and I think four of five more vigorous cats were propped up in the cage with their paws poking through the mesh and clawing at everything that walked by and there at the bottom of the cage they were all standing on this poor little kitten's head so of course we took her home; it was only humane. Then the story that followed was a quasi-roman à clé after the cat got sick a couple of years later using sickness as a metaphor for that ugly period after you split up. As for "The Red and the Black," I've always been drawn to contrasts, imagery and color. I remember back in high school Neil Young released "Rust Never Sleeps." I was drawn to "Out of the blue and into the black," like, what's that mean; from the sky to space? The bright sky to night? So yes, I was reading Stendhal's bildungsroman years later and the title just stuck. I wanted to explore how people react to things in a similar environment; birth and death at a hospital was something I could do in a short story, everything in that story is fictional and everything is real. My daughter was born two years after my grandfather died, but they're together in my head and heart. So from Stendhal's writing desk in 1830 through my kid's birth that idea evolved. As for the title, I apologize to the Stendhal estate.

Tyler: What would you say is the overall theme or purpose of "Little Stories"?

Jeff: I think the overall theme of the book is life. It's like my favorite self-help book from the 70's, "I'm not okay, and you're not okay, but that's okay." I think everyone goes through the kind of things I put in the book. You see someone else has had these types of things happen to them and you're sharing a little of your own humanity. Hey, I blew all my money at the bar last night and woke up sick and wasn't that stupid, but hopefully, you'll read the stories and think "I'm not alone; we're all stupid sometime." Maybe we'll be just a little nicer to each other with that understanding.

Tyler: I understand betrayal is one of the themes of the book? Will you tell us about how it works into a story and why you thought it a good topic for a story?

Jeff: Betrayal, I don't necessarily see the stories as betrayal. Most of the reviews say it's a dark and moody book. I don't think I'm a dark and moody guy. I think the reason they're dark and moody is because that is more interesting. You have to create tension in 2,500 words—what are you going to write about? It's like the first line from Anna Karenina, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." I could write a story about how me and my wife, or girlfriend, or whoever, are in love, we went to fabulous dinner, held hands and went home and made love, but that would be boring. I'd have to give a little packet of coffee to the reader to keep them awake and I couldn't afford that.

Tyler: Jeff, I was very struck by the mood or atmosphere of the artwork on the front cover of "Little Stories." Would you tell us about why you chose the artwork for the cover?

Jeff: Dark and moody again. I turned the book into the publisher and they gave me two pictures to choose from. The current cover and another of a fuzzy stand up mirror sitting in the corner picture, like the photographer had a cataract or something. I actually just sent the two covers out to all my friends by email and let them vote on the cover and the current cover won. I guess it's a thoughtful guy, though I think his haircut looks a little like Roger Daltry after he cut off his curls. I have a friend, Susan Vaillant, over in Strasbourg, Germany who told me her husband thought the book title should be, "Seven weeks at Auswitch" with that picture (she voted for the other cover). I didn't think it was that tragic, but once again; the reader or the viewer brings their own eyes to the picture. Buy this book and maybe the publisher will give me more options next time.

Tyler: What would you envision for the cover yourself if you were the artist?

Jeff: I'm taking an art class currently at Penn. State and doing a lot of collage work lately, so I guess I might have a cover like the black and white scene in "The Wizard of Oz" where Dorothy is in her house and it gets sucked up by the tornado. She looks out the window and she sees her uncle, aunt and the witch flying by. I'd have a window and the different characters from the book randomly pasted in a big collage. It would probably suck since my art skills seem to have leveled off around 2nd Grade, but it might be a hit in Amsterdam or something.

Tyler: You seem to be disagreeing with the "dark and moody" label to your book. How would you describe the stories yourself? What was your goal when you set out to write them or what feeling or response did you hope to get from your readers?

Jeff: I'd describe them as I did earlier, here's my photo album; a pastiche of embellished experiences and fictional representations of things that either happened to me or I find interesting. Let's sit down and share them. Luckily I'm a fairly average guy so I think they might resonate in some limited way with a lot of people. My original goal was to get a good grade in a writing class at Iowa, but luckily I'm aiming a bit higher these days and whether I hit the mark or not, I'll leave to the reader.

Tyler: What do you hope readers will learn from reading "Little Stories"?

Jeff: Hmm...there's as much beauty and dignity in our failures as our successes. Once again, I don't think it's that dark. Maybe I hope the reader will just see a little more.

Tyler: Will you give us an example of what happens in one of the stories that reflects that beauty or dignity in failure?

Jeff: I don't know, the ending to "Cosette" really happened. Death is ugly, but that was very beautiful; it still chokes me up a bit when I recall it.

Tyler: Our reviewer, Paige Lovitt, commented that she was very impressed by how talented a writer you are. Jeff, would you share a favorite passage from one of your stories so we can get a sense of your writing style?

Jeff: My this one puts me on the spot. It's like a lover asking you to tell you her you love her. It's a loaded question. This one makes me laugh though, I wrote it around Chad a bartender here in Kansas City where I live (not that there aren't a thousand dark, short haired, energetic bartenders in every city). When the book came out another bartender down at Fitzgerald's Pub down 29th Street in New York thanked me for calling him out in the book. I didn't have the heart to disappoint him. It's from "*Most Likely to Succeed*."

Fitzgerald's is one of those classic New York Irish pubs. The bar has three huge mirrors encased in dark oak frames. The two side mirrors have three shelves on them, orderly stocked with many different colored bottles of liquor with the light diffusing through them. The middle mirror arches high over the bar, reaching its apex with a classic wooden cornice. The dark wooden bar has a brass foot-rail running at its base the full length of the bar. In the middle of the bar, two large brass taps with an assortment of domestic and imported brands dispense an array of beers, and a line of wooden stools lines the front. Chad, the bartender, is about twenty-five, slim, athletic, five foot ten with dark brown eyes, and a shock of black hair that goes from a messy pile to a short, styled cut depending on the season. He works up and down the bar like a prize fighter dancing and weaving in a championship match. Nobody's drink ever sits empty because before a patron can take his last gulp, Chad is sliding a fresh one in front of him with a wink and a smile.

Wayne sits down at the bar, and as Chad pushes a fresh pint of beer in front of him, he says, "This one's on the house, buddy. You hit it pretty hard last night. I think you paid this month's mortgage, although I don't know why. So how the hell are you feeling today?"

"Thank you," Wayne replies, glancing at his watch as he gazes toward the door, "I feel OK, but I won't be hitting it quite as hard tonight."

Chad gives him a puzzled look, "You shaved off your mustache today. It looks good. It makes you look ten years younger. What made you do that?"

Tyler: How would you describe your writing style, Jeff?

Jeff: Once again, these are just little vignettes, so I think my writing style is more like a photographer or a painter; when I start on a bigger work, I'll worry more about character development and evolution so I'll try to write it differently. In these short stories I wanted to capture a scene that sheds light on an emotion or event with as much economy as I could. It's like Cezanne describing Monet as "only an eye, but my God, what an eye!" I'm not implying I have anything in common with the talent or geniuses of those two, but what made Monet immortal was how he saw things and later captured them on a canvas. Technically, he wasn't any better or worse than his contemporaries, but his vision was sublime. Reducing that thought to my level, in this book I really tried to emphasize describing scenes to draw you into the story and see through the narrator's eyes.

Tyler: What do you enjoy most about writing short stories? Do you prefer them to non-fiction essays or novels?

Jeff: I guess the thing I enjoy the most about writing is really the feedback I get from readers. It gives me a little glimpse of a person I wouldn't have gotten otherwise. Which medium do I prefer? I actually just like good writing. Ask me if I like blondes, redhead, short or tall women. Sorry, they all have their virtues and they all have their vices.

Tyler: What do you think is the most difficult part of writing a short story and how do you overcome that difficulty?

Jeff: The English language; I'm a sloppy writer. Being a broke, sloppy writer I had a couple of retired English teachers at the bar edit my stuff for beer and I guess I got what I paid for. Usually I have an idea of where I want a story to go, or an ending in my head. I just have to weave a plausible path to get there.

Tyler: Jeff, do you have any other books you're currently working on?

Jeff: Yes, next spring I start on the novel. It will be a mixture of broken dreams, unfulfilled expectations, and unrequited love with a tragic ending. Yes, maybe I am dark and moody.

Tyler: Thank you for the interview today, Jeff. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information our readers may find there about "Little Stories"?

Jeff: The [website](#) is really just an excerpt, a little sentimental video Outskirt put together, a reading of a friend's poem, and a link to my email; all this leavened with a bit of narcissism. If you want any more information about me, buy the book or buy me a cocktail and we can make a night of it.

Tyler: Thanks, Jeff. That doesn't sound like a dark and moody offer. I appreciate your taking the time for me to interview. Best wishes for the rest of your writing career.

[Listen to interview on Inside Scoop Live](#)
[Read Review of Little Stories](#)