
On the Fictions of Stephen Graham Jones and the Stories that Made Him, and well, Us Too

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Since being honored in 2017 with a Bram Stoker Award for superior achievement in *Mapping the Interior*—his 17th novel—by the Horror Writer’s Association, the work of Stephen Graham Jones has exploded onto the national scene as so many of his readers have long anticipated. Jones has gone on to amass an impressive number of additional awards and honors, including three more Bram Stoker Awards, along with three Shirley Jackson Awards for outstanding achievement in the literature of horror, the dark fantastic, and psychological suspense, and a Ray Bradbury Award by the LA Times Festival of Books for Science Fiction, Fantasy & Speculative Fiction. Given such impressive accomplishments, one can only wonder about what he might come up with and put down on paper next.

The sheer number of awards Jones has received since 2017 is itself remarkable, but what makes these accomplishments even more impressive is the diverse range of genres and literary categories for which the excellence of Jones’ work has been recognized. For those who have been following the trajectory of Jones’s writing, however, the wide-ranging nature of his writing across so many disparate landscapes, themes, forms and genres, marks the continuation of the steady thrust of innovation, innate fearlessness on the page and seemingly limitless imagination that typify his fiction. And as the most recent cluster of works indicate, it seems clear that he will only continue to push and prod at the boundaries of his literary potential, while continuing to revolutionize and enliven native and indigenous storytelling forms.¹ Thus, whatever shape Jones’s next novels may take, we can expect them to be bold experiments in

fiction presented in the same uncompromising style that has become his signature—and powered by a language that burns like a white-hot flame through the stagnant expectations and fugitive poses that some readers and critics just can't seem to relinquish.

In another way, Jones has also done more than any other writer to take up the call first articulated by Gerald Vizenor, through the cackle of a clown crow beseeching readers to "listen ha ha ha haaa" for the voices that lead out of the darkness of oblivion and victimry to a world defined in native terms, and then, "laughing, ha ha ha haaa," within his own boldly experimental novel of apocalypse and survivance in *Darkness in St. Louis: Bearheart* (vii-ix). This is a function and a motive that pours from the page, regardless of where one had the good fortune to first stumble into Jones's storied world.

Odds and chances that emerge from the span of a career that has produced around thirty books and more than three-hundred short stories, beginning with a set of stories in the mid-90s including "The Parrot Man," "The Ballad of Stacy Dunn" and "Paleogenesis, Circa 1970." These are interesting works in their own right, but ones that only hinted at what was to come and that burst onto the literary scene in novel form with the phantasmagoric speed trip of *The Fast Red Road*. From here one was free to choose their own adventure between a tornado-tracking slasher imprinted with the Land of Oz, or the spiraling narrative labyrinths meticulously constructed in *Demon Theory*. Or perhaps, it might have been a renegade father's uncanny return to his daughter in the riotous form of a bunny-headed lord of the chupacabras, wreaking havoc along the southern borderlands of Texas that drew you in.

To these peerless works establishing the boldness of Jones's literary explorations and experimentations early on, writing as if channeling the energies and spirit of Gilgamesh and Dr. Frankenstein, we can add the blurred temporalities

collapsing back upon themselves in *Ledfeather* and the cartographic escapes playing out on different planes of reality in *Mongrels* and *Mapping the Interior*. And, more recently to the sublime and phantasmagoric mingling of slasher and survivance, guilt and comeuppance dispensed to us in the intertwined stories of four Blackfeet friends that make up the core of the story contained in *The Only Good Indians*, or in the unsinkable character of Jade Daniels in *My Heart is a Chainsaw* and the soon-to-be second novel of his Jade trilogy, *Don't Fear the Reaper*. One of the great things about Jones that is reflected in this sampling of works, and what has helped him build such a large, diverse and loyal readership, is that the pathways and portals are voluminous while the routes to get there are many.

And even with the consideration of such a dazzling body of texts, just as we've all seen rehashed in innumerable PowerPoint presentations including that stock Titanic-sinking image, these works represent merely the tip of the iceberg of Jones's ever-expanding body of work. Given this extraordinary archive, I would wager that Jones has his sights set on at least thirty more novels and hundreds more additional short stories—lovers of story can dream too, right? And who knows, in a world that seems on the verge of being overtaken by the soullessness of AI writing from programs like ChatGPT, or are they entities?, who better to have on our side fighting it out *Terminator 2* style for the future of human stories than Dr. Jones?

As I've always been taught that it is important to acknowledge and honor with a generosity of spirit those who came before us to create or make possible the spaces and opportunities we enjoy, whether ancestors, mentors or colleagues, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the roles of those who were so influential in helping to shape me into the teacher, writer and scholar, but also the person, I am today. These include Luci Tapahonso who taught me the ways of poetry and how the past can be made present through story and that places remain alive so long as there are memories to hold them.

With vital relevance to this current work, my first encounter with the writing of Stephen Graham Jones was in a graduate course I took on native fiction around 2004. It was a class taught by a newly-hired professor who would go on to produce some deeply affecting novels in her own right, Franci Washburn—a Lakota woman I am honored to call *hankasi*—that highlighted the work of “lesser-known” native writers. While that theme may now seem odd, few in that class or reading literature during that time had read anything in the realm of native fiction besides maybe a few stories by that writer who, I guess, has since become an astronaut or something. Whatever the case, the subtitle imparted the class with an added sheen, while promising to lead us down some literary paths not taken into what were still largely unexplored territories of form and genre.

What graduate student, especially at the start of one’s studies, wouldn’t want to take a class like that, right? In addition to novels from Mourning Dove, Zitkala-Sa, John Joseph Mathews, and Gerald Vizenor, Stephen Graham Jones’s 2000 novel, *The Fast Red Road*, was also included on the reading list. I’d be lying if I were to say I was able to appreciate the innovations and narrative risks Jones was taking at the time, as I was soon lost in the circuitous plot and complex relations between characters that drives the story. But, as I read and struggled to finish the novel, I felt as though some extraordinary and magical world had been revealed, a narrative realm charged with what I would later hear one of my colleagues, Selah Saterstrom, call “alchemical effects,” which were activated both on the page and in those ethereal spaces in the imagination where stories take shape and form. Still today, *The Fast Red Road* remains one of the most challenging and exhilarating books I’ve ever experienced as a reader, and the spiraling of narratives Jones conjures there will never cease to call me back in search of the storied treasures that remain unnoticed in each previous reading.

From a review of the articles included in this special issue, I get the distinct feeling that something similar is afoot in the hearts and minds of this esteemed group of scholars, both in the process of writing and the enthusiasm for Jones's works that inspired them. For each contributor displays their own unique passions for story in the ideas and insights they offer us in their literary uncoverings, while invigorated by the determination to share this common passion with others. The keen perceptions offered in the five articles making up this feature take us back to *Ledfeather*, and, from there, explore a range of Jones's more recent works including *Mongrels*, *Mapping the Interior* and *The Only Good Indians*, while highlighting the wealth of scholarly interests and disciplinary knowledge of our contributors. Then we close with a conversation I had with Stephen focused on his experiences as a writer and insights on contemporary publishing organized around his latest fictions and the turn to horror displayed in his work since *Mongrels*. Beyond what we might learn from this writing, my hope is also that the more elemental and instinctual passion for stories and their capacity to change the world which Jones has often spoken of shines through.

Afterall, and as scholars especially, it is critical to remember that regardless of how vital our work may be to our careers, our sense of professional or personal identity, or even our livelihoods, at the purest and most fundamental of levels, everything always goes back to story—as the origin and source of all of these matters and concerns, and not only that, but so too the material out of which of our very lives are animated.

Notes

¹ In following Gerald Vizenor's conventions on the use of capitalization in reference to the terms *indian* and *native*, but more importantly what this usage signifies in terms of

colonial representation and simulation, "native" and "indigenous" are rendered in lowercase throughout this essay.

Works Cited

Vizenor, Gerald, *Darkness in Saint Louis: Bearheart*. Truck Press, 1978.