

Idaho, Language, and Poetry as a Last Resort

Audio Transcript

Intro: Welcome to the James Castle House Community Chats. In this series of short recorded interviews, James Castle House residents engage in one-on-one conversations with members of our community.

Through our residency program, emerging and mid-career artists, scholars, and professionals are invited to live and work on site at the historic home of James Castle, taking inspiration from their experience to create a body of new works.

Our current resident, Eric Follett, is a writer and linguist who uses his work to explore the ways in which we, as communities and individuals, interact with our landscape. This week, Eric chats with fellow writer and poet, Catie Young about Idaho, language, and poetry as a means of last resort.

C: So, we're both poets and writers, and that from what I can sort of gather, we both come at writing and poetry from sort of various different angles. Or, you're coming at your study of Castle from various different angles.

E: Yeah.

C: And, anyway, there's a sort of linguistics background and an Idaho background and a poetry interest. And so, I just wanted to talk to you a little bit about those things. So, I guess my first question is, how do you understand poetry's function for you as a writer? Maybe you can sort of put it alongside linguistics if you want, but sort of what is the function of poetry in your writing life?

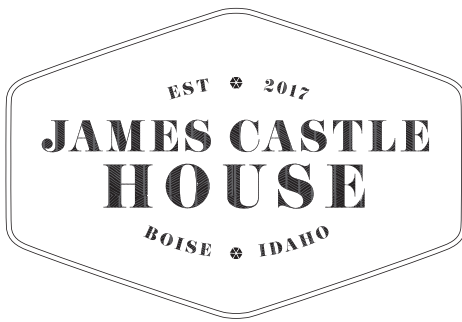
E: Yeah, that's a really good question. Sort of my initial response to it is that poetry, in my mind, is almost like a means of last resort. Um, just in the sense that I sort of don't, I don't know, I don't feel like I really think poetically or think in like poetic forms, you know? And the reading that I do, you know, is mostly fiction.

C: Sure.



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E: I like novels, and the writing that I sort of try hardest at is also fiction, but I don't know. I think there's just certain experiences, whether it's like an image or a feeling, it's almost like they come with a particular form that they expect to be, you know? And so, like I sort of always start out hoping that things are stories, but sometimes they're not. Sometimes they're just poems.

C: I love that.

E: Yeah, that's sort of what it feels like. That might not be accurate, you know, but that's what it feels like for me.

C: But I think that that you're saying about image or feeling, I think poetry really is conducive to that. It's sort of the feeling container, whereas an essay for me is a thinking container.

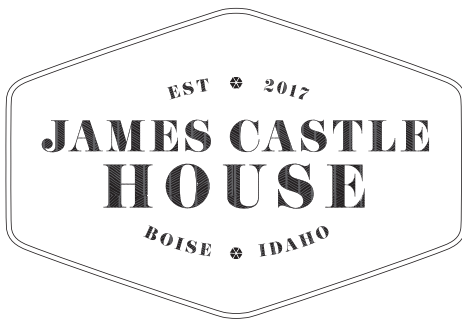
E: Yeah.

C: Um, what is a story like for you? Like, what does that function as?

E: Yeah, it's funny that you kind of frame it that way, because I actually, the last couple days have really been thinking a lot about this. Um, I think stories to me feel more like they come from memory. And, not necessarily just like a narrative of past events, you know? But I spent last year working pretty hard to get sort of a first working draft of a longer project that I have and the more I worked on it, the more I sort of felt like I was remembering what had happened in the story, rather than sort of creating it or making it up or whatever. Um, and so I think maybe that's the dynamic that, you know, I would like to explore in sort of longer story things, and poetry, on the other hand, is more, you know, that feeling of walking down the street and like having a quick realization or having an image really strike you. So maybe more of like, a moment rather than a memory, if that makes sense.

C: Absolutely. So, you and I are both more or less from Idaho and I think have had a couple of conversations now about the feeling that even though Castle didn't necessarily draw landscapes per se, I feel like I have from my first experience of his work, felt very much like he's an Idaho artist, and very much like maybe for me it has some to do with how prolific he is. Like, there's something around the work ethic that he had that has to do with that for me. But I guess, I know that you're thinking through Idaho, and landscape, and Castle right now, and I'm





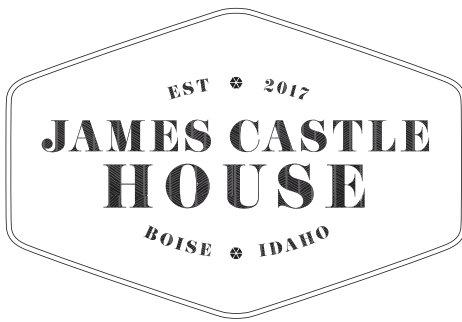
wondering if you have anything that you've discovered during your time at the house or otherwise that you feel compelled to share in that regard, or sort of what your experience has been exploring this.

E: Yeah, I can think of that sort of question maybe two different ways. One, because I've kind of had, you know, this whole experience of kind of digging into my own memories and my own experiences, especially, you know, growing up. My kind of childhood in Idaho Falls, that's on the one hand. On the other hand is, I sort of have kind of discovered or realized, the really specific and deep ways that Castle and his family were tied to Idaho and the place, and there's sort of the specifics about his upbringing—the fact that you know, as far as anyone knows, he never left the state. That all of his work is sort of deeply, deeply influenced by Idaho. You know, the fact that he worked with soot from the family's wood-burning stove means that a good chunk of his art is also literally Idaho. Assuming that the trees burned in the stove were Idaho trees. You know, the saliva from his mouth that never left the state, so there's like really physical ways as well.

C: Oh, yeah.

E: His maternal grandfather, Thomas Scanlon, was in Boise Basin when gold was discovered on Grimes Creek, which is the event that led to the settling of Southern Idaho and this whole thing. And so, he is kind of like this nexus of historical events. Like the physical landscape, obviously you know, everything that he produced was based on those landscapes. And then for myself, you know, kind of to tie it back to what you were saying, you know, he didn't necessarily explore the landscape. And we've talked about that before as well. He didn't go up the creek beds and into the drainages and into the mountains and explore these places, but you know, most of his drawings have those things in the background, right? And it's all set against that horizon, you know, I think about my own experience with Idaho. I wasn't an outdoors guy. I didn't hike or camp as a child, but you know, always had the foothills in Idaho Falls. You know and even out on the Western horizon, the lost rivers and the Lemhis and these big, beautiful mountain ranges. And it wasn't until I was older and I got into backpacking and hiking and started to spend time in these hills and kind of realizing, you know, being here, looking at Castle's work is sort of exploring the backdrop of the subconscious that I was raised with. You know, these hills on the horizon, and even though he didn't necessarily get to that second phase of exploring the hills and being out there, you know, it's sort of—to me it feels like a very





similar place in terms of kind of the subconscious and interacting with what was kind of always just a backdrop, if that makes sense.

C: Absolutely. I think, even though you talked about poetry being sort of the last resort for you, I think in the poems of yours that I've seen since you started this residency, particularly those that are, well, I was going to say those that have been composed in the house and around that space, but I think also those from Garden Valley and just from your time here in general, it's very clear to me that you have a linguistics background. Your use of language is incredibly sparse, and it's clear that there is an attention to language that feels different to me a little bit than, like all poets have an attention to language obviously, but there's a certain sort of sparseness to your work that feels influenced by linguistics to me. And I'm wondering if you see that or if you could talk about that in some way, if you feel that that's true. Like it feels like I read them and I'm like, these are the bare bones of language.

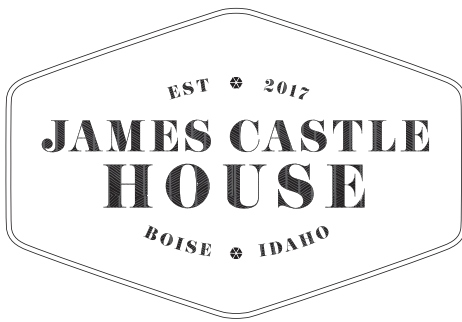
E: Yeah, that's really interesting. I wouldn't necessarily have thought that. Like, I'm pleased to hear you say that. I don't know, it was never my intention, but as you say that I feel happy.

C: Oh, good!

E: Yeah, I don't know. I think in terms of, you know, because when I studied linguistics it was from a scientific perspective, and so sort of controlling for different variables and kind of using language to experiment on itself. Also, you know, because language is such a subconscious process, we sort of more or less decide what to say, but we don't decide how to form our sentences and we're never thinking about what order to put the words in. And so it kind of, studying language from a scientific perspective forces you to kind of pull all of these things out of the subconscious realm and into awareness, you know? So, maybe kind of that is one of those aspects that I try to bring into my writing. Yeah, and again I think all writers do this, you know, to some extent. I just happen to have this background in linguistics that has made me very aware in different ways of how sentences are formed, why they are that way.

Yeah, I don't know I guess, and maybe this is a little outside of the linguistics thing, but I just really find myself interested in writers like... James Joyce is the most obvious example, who you can tell from their writing that they weren't using language to tell a story. That language was the thing, you know, like language is this reality that they're building. And so yeah, I think that's





kind of another aspect that I tried to bring into it is, um, really thinking of the words that I'm using, not as constructing images but as the image itself maybe.

C: Absolutely. I think that we could keep talking for like two more hours.

E: Yeah, definitely.

C: But, I'm glad to have a little more of an idea of how you're thinking about all these different sort of lenses that different genres allow us and something I'm always really interested in.

E: Yeah, no, thanks. Those were like sort of much more interesting questions than I felt like I had answers for. But, yeah, good stuff to think about and maybe revisit a little deeper soon.

C: Totally. Thank you.



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