



BOOMER1

by Daniel Torday

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A Conversation with Daniel Torday

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?

The truth is I spent a good deal of my twenties trying not to be a writer. I had a job as an editor at *Esquire* magazine by day and at night I played bluegrass mandolin and sang high tenor in bands. One band was in a national TV commercial for Folgers Coffee. But writing always crept back in, and when I was in my late twenties I sent the opening pages of a novel to the good folks at the Syracuse MFA program, where I decided I would be willing to give up a good job and a great apartment in Ft. Greene to study with George Saunders and Mary Gaitskill and Amy Hempel et al. I was lucky enough that they took me, and while that novel ended up in a desk drawer, I wrote the rough drafts of my first two books up there—*The Sensualist* and *The Last Flight of Poxl West*.

Is there a book that most influenced your life? Or inspired you to become a writer?

I have always been a huge fan of Dostoyevsky, and his novels in general pushed me hardest as a novelist. I remember even in high school reading *Crime and Punishment*, and stopping at times to wait to read the next page while wondering: How would I solve a problem Dostoyevsky has put in the way here? In many ways the main character of *The Sensualist* was based on Dmitri from *The Brothers Karamozov*.

And in the case of *Boomer 1*, one of the initial inspirations was *Demons*. It's a crazy book, about a bunch of anarchists who try to shake things up in



Russia in the late nineteenth century, and it's often read now in relation to its "polyglot" nature—the fact that tons and tons of voices are at war with one another throughout the book. I reread it as I got started on this one, and in some ways I was reimagining the voices on the internet chatrooms as part of the loose organization "Silence" as being a kind of updating of those voices in *Demons*.

How did you become a writer? Would you care to share any writing tips?

When I was working as a magazine editor, I'd work at nights and on weekends on just pushing out short stories. When the time came to start drafting a novel, I was often overwhelmed by the anxiety of all I was reading—I'd help with a top-edit on a David Sedaris piece, then edit a review of a new David Foster Wallace novel, see folks reading Toni Morrison on the subway ride home, and by the time I got down to my own work I'd be...dizzied. So I've tried to develop processes to eliminate all that, and just to engage the subconscious, where good writing starts.

One kind of crazy thing I do at times is this: start with a Word file on my desktop on which I've put the view to 500%, the point size to 200, so I can only see one letter onscreen at a time. Then I'll just type ahead on a draft of a story, or a novel opening, for a month or two. It makes it so I can't obsess over whether what came before it is any good, and focuses me inward.

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What was the inspiration for this novel?

During research for my last book, I found myself reading deeply into Shakespeare. While I was reading *Julius Caesar*, it occurred to me that the intergenerational conflict between Caesar and Mark Brutus/Cassius sounded a lot like... the perceived conflict between the millennials and baby boomers in the U.S. today. Ever since Occupy Wall Street I'd been looking for a way to dramatize that kind of conflict, and I had in the back of my mind that the biggest criticism of Occupy was that it didn't have a clear central goal, or central figure. And so the whole thing mapped well: Mark Brumfeld would be Brutus. His ex-bandmate, ex-girlfriend, Cassie, would be Cassius. And Mark's mother, Julia, a baby boomer who'd almost lived the rock-and-roll life we most associate with that generation, would be the emperor, felled by her own son.

I guess it sounded a little facile, at first, and I didn't want to hone too closely to the play or the history. But when it bore fruit it really worked—pushing me to present a lot more of Julia's past life than I'd intended, and bringing the FBI, side figures, into light. And as I started to look into the story behind the Shakespeare, reading the Plutarch's *Lives* versions of both Julius and Brutus—this was Shakespeare's own source material, and was originally imagined as *Parallel Lives* though we don't read it that way today—I learned so much. Probably the most useful thing was that while there's just one line suggesting it in the play, there was a tradition that Caesar has lost his hearing, and that was part of people's perception of his



potential weakness. It pushed me hard to think about hearing loss, which I know so many of my parents' friends have suffered from, and how it might help define the latter Julia sections.

Can you tell us about what research, if any, you did before writing this novel? Do you have firsthand experience with its subject? Base any of the characters on people from your own life? What is the most interesting or surprising thing you learned as you set out to tell your story?

I'm a neurotic researcher, and I've always looking for both literary and historical background for my novels. So when I realized that Mark/Isaac was going to be involved in an act of "domestic terrorism," I read everything I could get my hands on, starting with books about Anwar al Awlaki and the way his Islamicist videos went viral across the globe. I read Masha Gessen's book on the Boston Marathon bombers, and Andrew Sullivan's *Far from the Tree* to focus on the sections on the Columbine attackers. I read tons of those kinds of books.

Beyond that I wanted to bone up on my sense of where this kind of revolutionary fervor fit into American history. So I went back to the basics: Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson, Thoreau, even Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. If you're looking for an inspiration to get a character ranting...man, could those guys rant. And I also did a bunch of homework on John Brown and Emma Goldman, seeking out parallels—I knew a little about them, but watching those figures fighting loudly for what they believed was an education. I

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learned simultaneously that you could argue that John Brown was responsible for the end of slavery, and that based on what he did at Osawatomie you could pretty much call him a terrorist.

Finally, I wanted to know a lot about the dark web and about the kinds of chatrooms that have both led to some interesting progress—and to the rise of Trumpism. So I read everything there was to read about Anonymous, about 4chan and those kinds of dark corners of the web. To tell the truth, I care too much about my family and my own sanity to have pushed too hard into that territory, but I watched a lot of low-budget documentaries about them, and a lot of YouTube videos about how to surf using TOR, the dark web, etc. I also had one unfortunate Twitter exchange with some folks in that world and learned that it's a terrible idea to kick the hornet's nest, no matter how tempting.

Are you currently working on another book? And if so, can you tell us what it's about?

I'm currently at work on a new novel, tentatively titled *The 12th Commandment*. In the book, a New York magazine writer travels to central Ohio to look into the complicated subculture of the Dönme, a small group of adherents to the only Jewish-Islamic sect in western history. Samuel Gerson is assigned to report on the murder of a young Jewish-Islamic kid who prosecutors believe has been killed because he's the son of a member of a shadowy group of mystical followers of the seventeenth-century Turkish religion—a kind of cross between Sufi mysticism and Hassidism. The book takes up the leaders of a subset of this religion that has begun to grow in rural Ohio.



A Look Inside Boomer 1

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Throughout *Boomer 1*, one of the three main characters, Mark Brumfeld, who goes by the *nom de cyberguerre* Isaac Abramson, gives what he calls “Boomer Missives”—YouTube videos imploring and convincing millennials to force baby boomers to quit their jobs. A number of these appear in the book, along with rudimentary sketches Abramson makes and shows onscreen. Here’s one that ended up on the cutting-room floor, along with his sketch:

Boomer Missive #17

“This is Boomer Boomer Missive Number Seventeen. Tonight I want to talk to you about the damage our parents’ music has done to us in the years since we were kids. Every generation before us has found its own culture. Every generation before ours was built on the sheer fact of, if not destroying, than undermining the cultural artifacts of the generation that preceded it. The baby boomers, they had Kent State, they had the Chicago Democratic National Convention. They had Dylan stepping onstage at the Newport Folk Festival, plugging in his electric guitar, and physically repelling his audience with electric music they didn’t want, weren’t prepared for.

“When we were teenagers, we had hip hop, to be sure. We had NWA and the Posse, we had Run DMC and Public Enemy and 2 Live Crew. Our parents might have recoiled from the chorus to ‘Fuck tha Police.’ But then what we also had was... Kent State, which we listened to in Neil Young’s ‘Ohio.’ And we had Chicago, too, only we had it secondhand. And we listened to Dylan gone electric and it felt just as old as music could get,

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but it felt new, too. Putting on *Sgt. Pepper* for the first time, hearing 'Come Together' for the first time, 'Strawberry Fields'—this remained a new culture event for new teenagers who took that music on, went to Dead shows, waiting for them to play covers of the Beatles, of the Stones. And when those bands started to use MIDI technology, to create ersatz instruments onstage using computers attached to their electric guitars, they started a process of filtration and compression and distillation that has impoverished us ever since. They got to see the Dead at Fillmore West in 1968. We got to see the Dead at RFK Stadium in 1995. There was no comparison.

"But the MIDI technology, the musicians pretending to play violin sounds on an electric guitar onstage instead of having someone just play a damn violin onstage—this was one thing that though we didn't know it at the time, and though they didn't know it at the time, has damaged us. Because instead of the sounds of Brian Wilson figuring out how to bring actual animals into the studio for *Pet Sounds* or dragging a drum set into the bathroom of his studio to get real actual reverb, we have ringtones. We have Bluetooth speakers and we have friends who pull out their iPhone and play the latest D'Angelo record on the tiny tinny speaker, blasting compressed versions of music that doesn't sound one iota like the music it's supposed to be. Our ears have grown sick. We cannot hear. The Boomers have stolen this from us, the ability even to hear music the way we're supposed to. They've deafened our ears to so much.

"You're sitting there asking, *So what can we do about it? How can we change the sound, how can we undo*



what's been done? There is just one area where we can effect change, and that's in the leadership in this country. We live in a democracy, sure, but we live in an oligarchy as well. We live in an era of unfettered capitalism, and we can do better than to hide our heads in the sand about it. The only way to affect change is to change leadership, and the leadership that matters is the leaders of the companies that sell you shit. Record companies cut costs by using all that MIDI technology. Computer companies cut costs by building drastically compressed audio files into the computers they sell you. Apple built this drastically compressed MIDI-based technology into phones, the laptops and tablets you bought, and now your ear is sick.

“So probably you're sitting there asking, So what can we do about it! All those people who have made those decisions so poorly for all that time can retire. How many baby boomers are still sitting in offices at jobs they were meant to retire from five, ten, even twenty years ago? How many college professors are a decade, even two, past the age when they were meant to let their grasp on their classrooms go, to pass it along to the next generation? So they must retire. They must go. We must achieve ROWRY.

Behind the Novel

 *A Note from the Author*

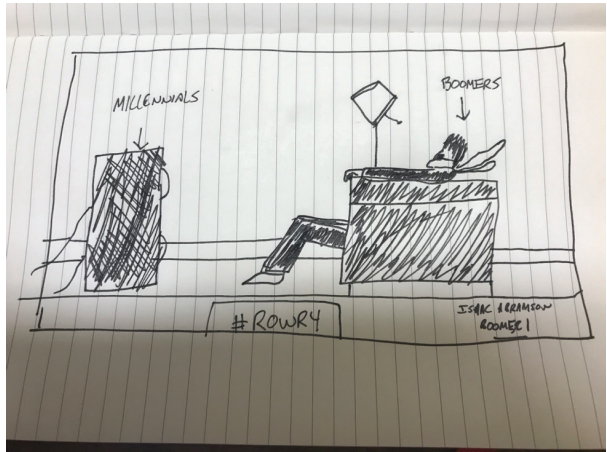
“ROWRY=Retire or We’ll Retire You.

“ROWRY.

“Resist much, Obey Little.

“Propaganda by the deed.

“Boom boom.”





Recommended Reading

Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*

Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*

Don DeLillo, *Libra*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Demons*

Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*

Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War*

Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*

Mark Rudd, *Underground: My Life with the SDS and Weatherman*

Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

Scott Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President and the Rise of the Drone*

Dana Spiotta, *Eat the Document*

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Reading Group Questions

1. How much does your being either a baby boomer or a millennial—or neither—come to affect your reading of this book? Do you put much weight in the idea of generations, generation gaps, intergenerational conflict?
2. Which of the three main characters did your sympathies end up lying with the most by the end of the book? Did it change as you read forward and met each character, then came back to them?
3. So much of the book is premised on the idea that the music of the baby boomer era influences how we think about sixties culture—and about our own. How did the through-line of music effect your reading?
4. How much did you know about the “dark web,” or unauthorized parts of the internet? Did you feel like you learned a lot about that world, and if so, how?
5. This book was written before, during, and after the 2016 election. How much do you think our politics have shifted since it was written? What did it illuminate for you about our current predicament?
6. Given that there’s a big act of violence looming in the last third of the book, how much did that affect your readings of each character?
7. The idea of “domestic terrorism” is central to the plot of *Boomer 1*, perhaps in a way we’re not entirely used to in our contemporary conversations about global violence. Could you imagine an action like this happening now? How would it be handled in the press?



8. There are so many different voices in this book, from Cassie and Mark and Julia to the voices of the faceless characters on chatrooms who undergird so much of the action. How did each voice feel distinct to you? How did they feel different?

*Keep On
Reading*