

In Conversation with Quinten Dol

MJ: Your story explores the idea of animals taking action against human harm to nature. How do you balance realism with the fantastical elements of animals fighting back in a way that resonates with readers? Reading your story, I thought you did a great job balancing those two components.

QD: Thank you, I'm glad you thought so! I guess I always try to root my scenes and characters in small, relatable actions, details and relationships — regardless of the character's species, in this case. It was fun to research and imagine how squirrels and other animals experience the world, and then try to communicate it in a way that might resonate with humans. I'm always trying to give the reader a sensory experience which, I suppose, helps to lend a bit of realism to an otherwise bonkers plot.

MJ: What role do you think fiction (and literature in general) plays in raising awareness about environmental issues, and how do you hope your short story contributes to that conversation?

QD: Awareness of environmental issues starts with an awareness of our environment and, as humans, we are uniquely talented at ignoring our environment. For example, our cities are mostly designed around car travel, which physically seals us off from the environment and each other. Even when we walk, run, bike or ride public transit, we often use screens and/or headphones to literally block out the sensory experience of our surroundings.

Humans love stories about secret societies that operate in our midst and, among such a distracted population, it would be pretty easy to get away with one. But you don't really need to invent wizards and fairies because there are already whole societies experiencing dramas and comedies all around us all the time, in plain sight. Squirrels are just one particularly entertaining example.

Also, when you start paying attention it turns out that we humans often play a big role in those "hidden in plain sight" societies — the point is that we all live in one big pan-species society. So I guess I hope "Acts of the Apostles" helps readers make some progress towards that realization.

MJ: How did you approach creating the voice and perspective of the animals in your story? There are several animal characters throughout your story, and each felt distinct and unique from the other. Were there particular challenges in writing from their point of view?

QD: Again: thank you, I'm glad you thought so. I started writing this story with Pricklebrush, a forest squirrel who becomes a semi-divine figure within a community of city squirrels. During my research I learned that there are many behavioral differences between forest and city squirrels — city squirrels use more sign language to communicate than forest squirrels, for example, because cities are noisier and offer better visibility than the forest.

Then I leaned on some good old anthropomorphism — it helps when you're working with "inducted" squirrels who, through close study and very targeted psychedelics, are trying to understand (and therefore resemble) humans. A lot of the distinguishing traits you read in the squirrel characters are borrowed from different parts of my personality, or from people I know and love.

MJ: What would you like for readers to take away from when they read your story? How do you hope your readers' perspectives on nature, wildlife, and environmental activism might shift?

QD: My first intention is always to show the reader a good time. But beyond that, I think the question at the heart of "Acts of the Apostles" is this: are humans still part of the global ecosystem (the "one big pan-species society" I referenced earlier), or have we truly separated ourselves from "nature" and become something new?

As you can probably tell, I agree with Pricklebrush's answer to that question. But the way we currently see ourselves, structure our society and live our lives definitely seems to jive more closely with Willory's interpretation of humanity. Continued failure to recognize this disconnect would doom us to life in a diminished and devastated ecosystem, and therefore a diminished and devastated civilization. Meeting this moment as a species would require the forging of a new sense of citizenship within a large, more-than-human community and ecosystem. Or, as happens in the story, having one forged for us.

MJ: Can you walk us through your creative process when writing this story? Did you begin with the theme of environmental protection, or did the plot and characters develop first?

QD: This one started small, a couple of years ago, with an experiment to write a “realistic” short story from a non-human’s perspective. At the time my wife and I lived in Medford, Massachusetts where she attended grad school. During our first summer there I spent many evenings hanging out in a hammock in our backyard, where I did a lot of squirrel watching and grew very fond of them. (I’m from Australia, so I didn’t grow up with squirrels.) They used to scurry around this big oak in our neighbors’ backyard. My wife and I once joked about attaching glow stick collars so we could track them in the dark, and so we called them “disco squirrels.”

At the same time I was reading Alan Watts’ *The Book*, which is a 1960s attempt to explain basic tenets of Buddhism to a Western audience. I was obsessed with this one chapter which explains how all life on Earth evolved from a single ancestor — you, me, the trees, coral, birds, bacteria, we all have the same single-celled great grandparent. According to Watts, this means we are all expressions of a single planet-bestriding “life force,” and so when you look out at your neighbor, or trees, or coral, or birds or bacteria, you are also looking back at yourself. Some cultures call this life force (of which we are all constituent parts) “god,” others call it “the one.” It’s very New Agey stuff.

Humanity is in a peculiar situation: We currently possess all the technological tools we need to decarbonize and avoid the worst effects of climate change, but our institutions and culture seem incapable of implementing them. I thought Watts’ “life force” could be a fun, fantastical solution to explore and a fun character to write, and then enlisted the disco squirrels as agents for the mission.

MJ: What are you currently working on?

QD: I’m working on my first fiction novel, which is a modern version of the old picaresques that follow the outlandish adventures of a roguish, low-born hero as they climb the social ladder of a corrupt society. In this case, the story is set in the United States and Mexico across 30-ish years between the 2010s and 2040s.

I have also been working on short stories, and generally having a lot of fun with the form. I hope that shows in “Acts of the Apostles,” which was very fun to write and is only the second piece of fiction that I have ever had published. The first was when I was eight — it was about homesick aliens and it placed third in some Queensland primary school kids’ short story competition. So seeing “Acts of the Apostles” published in *Portrait of New England* has been very exciting.

MJ: what are you currently reading?

QD: Lately I am splitting my reading between two types of books:

1. Novels and nonfiction works that are providing inspiration for the form, style and substance of my novel. Lately that’s included Amanda Montell’s *Cultish*, Javier Zamora’s *Solito*, Álvaro Enrigue’s *You Dreamed of Empires*, and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Survivor*. Right now, I’m reading *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow.
2. Pregnancy books, because this issue of *Portrait of New England* is scheduled to publish right around the due date of my first child! My wife and I found Emily Oster’s *Expecting Better* really helpful, and I am now wrapping up Penny Simkin’s invaluable *The Birth Partner*.