

Bright Before Us is the new novel by Katie Arnold-Ratliff.

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Q&A with Katie Arnold-Ratliff

The narrator of *Bright Before Us* is a twenty-four-year-old male named Francis. How did you approach telling a story from a man's perspective? What were some of the difficulties and obstacles you faced in taking on a male voice?

It wasn't a conscious choice to make him male. When I had the initial idea for the story—a class of small children finds a dead body on a beach—the teacher I envisioned was, for whatever reason, a man, and he simply stayed one. (Though I will say that I write about men often, perhaps because I find them sort of inscrutable and therefore fascinating.) I definitely encountered difficulties while writing in Francis's voice. I workshopped a version of the novel in grad school, and a male classmate asked me, "When Francis pees outside in chapter fourteen, why is he squatting?" I'd momentarily forgotten that men pee standing up—I had to remind myself of those kinds of basic aspects of maleness as I wrote and edited. But it helped that Francis is an amalgam of men I've known, because I had years of dialogue and action to draw from and recontextualize.

Could you talk a little about the unusual structure of *Bright Before Us*, which must have presented some challenges above and beyond the challenge of writing a first novel?

It took me five years to realize that alternating chapter by chapter between a first-person front story and a back story told in direct address was the best approach. Before that, I'd been trying to contrive triggers in the action that would call to mind Francis's past, and the connections were really inorganic and literal. Each time I deployed one in the text, you could almost see those wiggly flashback lines used in bad TV shows. So this solution was actually less challenging than trying to make that disaster work. This structure gave me the freedom to delve deeply into the history between Francis and Nora, the girl he can't get over, and to give that history real heft; I also got to give the book two climaxes for the price of one. It was difficult, though, having to craft a dozen semi-cliff-hangers, one per chapter, to keep readers caring about story A while they spent time in story B, and vice versa. But once I got comfortable with that rhythm—to get the pacing right, I wrote the book from beginning to end rather than composing the parallel stories separately—I saw how much the form echoed the content. It makes sense that Francis's past and present are intertwined, because he can't let go of what happened.

What were some of the books and movies that influenced *Bright Before Us*?

To get into Francis's ruminative state of mind, I read a lot of poetry—much of it by Louise Glück (who provides the novel's epigraph), Gregory Orr, Charles Simic, and Mark Doty. I read a ton of James Baldwin, whose characters can tell you in exposition what they're thinking and feeling, and you never feel you're being denied the chance to learn that on your own ("show, don't tell" is a good guideline, sure—but it can be artfully defied). I watched *L'Avventura*, the 1960 Antonioni film that begins with a woman's disappearance and then moves on to other concerns entirely; the book does something

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similar. *Half Nelson*, a film about a good and decent young teacher with a penchant for self-destruction, was obviously a huge help. The novel contains several dreams, and I rewatched *The Sopranos* to see what they can accomplish at their best (the one in “Everybody Hurts,” in the fourth season, is genius). And it would not be an exaggeration to say that the book is an extended homage to *Six Feet Under*, in the way it grapples with loss, and what comprises our humanity, and the lifelong battle between our desires and those of the people to whom we’re obligated. Francis and Nate, the show’s main character, are both idealists who lack the emotional equipment to live up to their ideals. There’s something about that kind of inept striving that I find endearing.

Do you feel more of an affinity with Francis or with Nora?

I feel very tender toward Francis, even though he’s intensely flawed. I cut him some slack (emphasis on the some) because real growing up—i.e., realizing that happiness requires hard work that no one is going to do for you—is destabilizing, and very few of us come out of that transition without hurting someone. Plus, I think his good qualities help to redeem him. He’s introspective, observant, sensitive, and at least aware of his failings; it counts for something that he’s living an examined life. Honestly, I don’t feel much at all for Nora. It was my goal to make her unremarkable. She’s just a plain-Jane girl who seems perfectly nice (though she couldn’t possibly be as perfect and nice as Francis makes her out to be). I made that choice to underscore the essential truth about Francis’s fixation with their affair: the obsession is more about him than her. I think you get to the last page knowing a lot less about Nora than you might expect, considering she is in some ways the driving force of the novel.

While there is a shift in his perspective, Francis’s fate at the end of the novel is uncertain. What do you want your readers to take away from the book?

Though his fate is uncertain, I don’t think of the ending as being at all mysterious—we know that Francis has a direction in mind, and the final lines make it clear that while he will continue to wish for one, he doesn’t expect some major reversal to come down the pike. I wanted the ending to evoke peaceful resignation. I don’t think Francis is settling or giving up; he’s just seen what he’s come to see, and learned what he can learn, and now he knows it’s time to put away the thoughts that have consumed him. I want a reader to be moved by life’s shades of gray: there’s the thing you want and the thing you get, and though they’re often not the same thing, that doesn’t make what you get inherently awful. That there is a disparity between the two isn’t inherently awful, either—a little longing is good for us. I think it’s the purview of the adolescent to see everything in black and white: this is good, that is bad; this is just, that is unjust. Another part of becoming an adult is learning that in matters of the heart, what’s just is often irrelevant. Your wishes are often irrelevant. There’s great relief, even joy, in accepting that. And I think Francis begins to feel that at the end of the novel.

You earned an MFA at Sarah Lawrence. What were some of the advantages of studying creative writing? What were the disadvantages?

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I was lucky to make friends at Sarah Lawrence who are now among my most trusted editors. It's the connections you make that are most valuable. Writing is lonely, and it's good to have other writers around to keep you company. I can say categorically that I'm a stronger writer and editor for having gone there, because I got to experiment and practice. That's what it's all about—trying stuff out, failing, trying something new. And yet when people ask me if they should get an MFA, I never know what to say. A workshop is only as good as who's teaching it, and how engaged the students are, and those are awfully nebulous things on which to base two years and a lot of money. But if you're going to take on an MFA, I strongly advise doing two things: Read (don't be one of the many MFA candidates who has simply ignored the great works of literature) and don't worry so much about publishing. You write because you must. Publishing is just the cherry on top.

Did you have any teachers at Sarah Lawrence who made an impact on you? Have there been other teachers or mentors in your life?

I worked with Amy Hempel at Sarah Lawrence, and later privately. She taught me countless things, including how to think about cadence, how to write sex scenes, how to be wry. She taught me to write bravely—to go toward the awful or scary thing in the text, not away from it. But long before Amy, there was my fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Kleine. He employed this really innovative class-wide system called Trust, Risk, and Cooperation, in which we were rewarded for pushing ourselves emotionally and for encouraging others to push themselves, too. I've kept in touch with him—in fact, I talked to him to prepare for the book, and I made Francis's classroom look exactly like his.

Your current job is with O, the Oprah Magazine. Can you talk a bit about the differences you find in writing fiction and nonfiction? Do you have a preference?

I don't have a preference—they're equally hard. The nice thing about writing for a magazine is that I'm usually given a very specific mandate: Here's what this article should accomplish, here's the tone it should have, here's how long it should be. That's also the hard thing, because reverse-engineering a piece that way isn't a skill you learn from writing fiction, poetry, term papers, or publisher's catalog copy, which is all I'd written before I came to O. Fiction works the opposite way for me: I start with a broad idea, write a sentence, let that sentence inform the one that follows, and so on. But skills like concision, the ability to cut ruthlessly, and knowing how to structure something for maximum effect all apply to novels just as much as articles. And learning how to edit is a brilliant way to improve your own work. Speaking of mentors, my boss at O, Deborah Way, who is a notoriously exacting and extraordinarily talented editor, taught me that there's no great mystery to clear and beautiful writing. Words are tools, and must be used with great precision. She once made this list called "23 Rules of Editing" ("Start and end in the right place"; "No one enjoys stories about someone sittin' and thinkin'"); and the one I love best is "We write with nouns and verbs." There is one perfect word for any situation, and a bunch of inexact words are no substitute. In the work I've done since the novel—which I was finishing up just as I came to O—I can see the difference she's made. It's a very lucky thing, getting to work in a profession that strengthens my writing (to say nothing of the luckiness of having a boss you enjoy and admire).

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You've worked for a bookstore, for a book distributor, and now you work for a major magazine. What are some of the pressures you've noticed that the publishing industry presents to young writers who are trying to break into the field? How have you dealt with these pressures?

It depends on what segment of the industry you're talking about. With the larger publishers, there's often intense pressure to write something that can be categorized easily and sold effectively. The question is whether you're willing to respond to that pressure—and any first-time writer should know that if she chooses not to, she can still have a rewarding publishing career, because the big publishing houses aren't the only option. It became clear to me early on that this book wasn't meant to be on a big publisher's list, and that was fine. The distributor I worked for after college put out small press books, and getting to observe what was happening in the more remote corners of the publishing world was marvelous—there are so many brilliant people writing brilliant things. It's like a parallel universe of imaginative and unusual books, and since my books are only going to get weirder (see below), I imagine that I'll continue to be part of it.

What are you working on now?

I'm writing a book-length work of fictionalized nonfiction with two narrators: a pregnant woman who investigates the history of Mare Island (a former naval shipyard in California) after finding a suicide note in an abandoned car there and the dead man who wrote the note. Mare Island is a quietly significant place—it produced battleships that were present at the Guadalcanal campaign and the attack on Pearl Harbor, along with the USS Sargo, the first nuclear submarine to be built on a Pacific base; the USS Indianapolis was serviced there on its way to pick up Little Boy, the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. But since Mare Island closed in 1996, it's become an extraordinarily creepy place. It's littered with signs that warn of residual toxins, but home to a subdivision of identical million-dollar homes on its back end. You can look inside the windows of the abandoned buildings and see papers still on desks, plants that died fifteen years ago. I grew up about a mile from the base, and I'm obsessed with it—especially after finding the abandoned car and the note in 2004. (The female narrator isn't exactly me—but she isn't exactly not me, either.) The more I dig into Mare Island's history, the more rich and compelling it becomes: there was a widow who tended its lighthouse for thirty-five years; there were reports of rampant lobotomies taking place in the naval hospital, which housed all the mentally ill naval officers from the Pacific front; and there was an accident on the USS Sargo in 1960 that killed a seaman named James Smallwood, who was very young when he died. In 2008, I located his family in Illinois and asked each member what they remembered about James. Those talks were among the more remarkable experiences of my life—they spoke about who he was, who he didn't get a chance to be. I've titled the book *Little Boy*.