

# On Joe Ashby Porter



*Brian Evenson*

Joe Ashby Porter and I have met only once, unexpectedly, at an auditorium at a university in Paris listening to Harry Matthews. When I heard from his French translator Bernard Hœpffner that he was there I was eager to meet him: I'd long been impressed by his fiction and wanted to tell him so. We spent a few minutes talking in the aisle, something I very much enjoyed though I can now remember little of what was said: I remember him being soft spoken, though when people describe me as being that way I habitually think they must have me confused with someone else, so perhaps I'm wrong—all of which sounds like it could be a brief moment in a Porter story that was on its way somewhere else.

The thing I like the most about Porter's fiction is that I usually can't tell where it's going to take me—which is something I find myself saying less and less often the more I read. Porter's structuring is diaphanous and ephemeral and far from predictable. Indeed, Porter is one of the few writers I know who does actually seem genuinely to believe in a notion of organic form, rather than simply pretending to believe in it. His stories move along quietly, making their own way as they go, sometimes seemingly anecdotal, hardly like stories at all, but they nevertheless offer moments that are startling and surprising

and they lead us places that we don't expect. The only thing similar I can think of in terms of the deftness of that surprise are Dinesen's *Gothic Tales*. These startling moments can occur in terms of the story or plot, but more often they are linguistic, a turn of phrase so chiseled and telling that it can't be resisted. "Up through the underbrush troop jocular surfers in their globe of entitlement..." for instance, or "Perhaps through the silver mistiness black night showed more now" or "Knives are keen, bells shine." But of course the strength of these sentences, as with all sentences in a series, comes partly from the sentences around them. One of the most remarkable things about Porter's writing is the *range* of his syntax and vocabulary, the very definite texture that his stories take on through various windings and shifts in register, and the way one's sense of this texture deepens upon re-reading.

The books I've read most recently of Porter's are his first novel, *Eelgrass* (1977), and his latest story collection, *All Aboard* (2008). Told in 100 short chapters full of simple, crystalline prose, *Eelgrass* takes place on an island and seems to me to carry on a dialogue with *The Tempest*. Its various characters echo those of the play at moments, without ever settling in to being versions of them. Its narrative meanders without ever quite losing its own thread. Along the way anything is fair game, from discussions of the sociology of maps, to drug parties, to the abduction of a capitalist by the secret island savage. It strikes me as akin to another island book as well, Joy Williams' *The Changeling*, which was published a year after it. Both are brilliant books deserving of more attention than they seem to have gotten, books about strange makeshift and alternative communities that develop in bordered spaces, communities with the shadow of altered consciousness hanging over them (alcohol in Williams' case, pretty much every drug imaginable in Porter's).

*All Aboard* offers a remarkable range of stories—some with elements of near SF, some erotic, some simple and lyrical—all of which still could nevertheless be written by nobody but Porter. The language is colored by the consciousness of the characters, and Porter is more interested in bringing us into proximity with a character's phenomenological experience of the world around them than in making sure everything is orderly and explained. Everything is worthy of attention, as long as it seems worthy to a character within the text, and Porter goes to great pains not only to get us interested but to make that act of interesting us seem effortless. On one level his

fiction is about the etiquette of human relations, about shame and shamelessness, and about the quiet and careful gestures that draw us closer to or push us away from others. His writing is generous in the sense that it does not stand between us and the minds its words compose, but lets us embrace these simulated consciousnesses in all their flaws and failings.

In short, Porter is doing things that very few other writers are doing, and doing them beautifully.