
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

**WILD
THING**
A NOVEL

JOSH BAZELL

A conversation with Josh Bazell

How would you describe your latest book?

Right now, I've got a bunch of different things going on, most of them having to do with the interface of science and literature. I'm developing a show for HBO called *Emoticons* about punctuation that can turn into robots, but at the same time I'm doing some neuroscience research. It's about chemicals that get released in the brains of runners that make it impossible for them to not constantly tell other people they're runners. I'm also working on a new crime series where the books come out in reverse order so there's less stress on the reader. In book 14, which will be the first one to come out, all the characters are healthy and in their eighties. And this summer, I've got a nonfiction manga coming out about why so few people my age are named Connie.

Or are you asking about my new novel, *Wild Thing*? Which is all those things combined, but came out in February.

If someone were to write your biography, what would be the title and subtitle?

Ideally *One-Man Bachelorette Party: The Shockingly Long, Happy, Successful, Revenge-Laden, Sexualized, and Love-Strewn Life of Josh*

Bazell (and His Friends). Somehow *Cranky Old Asshole* seems more likely, though.

What fictional character would you like to date, and why?

Nancy Drew. We could figure each other out.

Offer a favorite sentence or passage from another writer.

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "She clung to that dress as you would cling to life if you loved it."

How do you relax?

Do I look relaxed?

Describe the best breakfast of your life.

I: "Dearest, I've brought food."

Nancy Drew: "Oh darling, I don't need any. I'm completely fulfilled. If you'd like, you can eat off my back."

Why do you write?

I was going to turn on the computer to check messages anyway.

Who's wilder on tour, rock bands or authors?

Authors. They're Oscar Wilder. Does anyone ever *not* give that answer?

Ten drastically underappreciated crime novels not written by me, in chronological order:

“An Outpost of Progress” (short story, really) by Joseph Conrad
(1896)

Rogue Male by Geoffrey Household (1939)

The Girl Who Had to Die by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding (1940)

The Judas Pair by Jonathan Gash (1977)

White Jazz by James Ellroy (1992)

The Ax by Donald Westlake (1997)

Deepwater by Matthew F. Jones (2000)

Come Closer by Sara Gran (2003)

Small Crimes by Dave Zeltserman (2008)

Strip by Thomas Perry (2010, tied with *Pursuit* by Thomas Perry,
2008)

Playlist for *Wild Thing*

In his own words, here is Josh Bazell's playlist for his novel Wild Thing:

If you need to be revved up.

Redd Kross, *Phaseshifter* / Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, *Far East Suite* / Metric, *Fantasies* / Dvořák, *Slavonic Dances*, with Alfred Scholz conducting the Slovic Philharmonic

Phaseshifter is the musical version of every writer's third-worst nightmare: the masterpiece you can never repeat. Every writer's second-worst nightmare: no masterpiece in the first place. Every writer's worst nightmare: the day when the only people who can make money from books are piracy sites and Amazon.com.

Far East Suite never gets old. I recently met Rudy Lawless, the drummer, on the subway (he was carrying a hi-hat, so I asked him what the best exit was for the Brooklyn Academy of Music and we started talking—I love New York), and he told me he knew Ellington and Strayhorn and that *Far East Suite* is almost all Strayhorn. So now when I talk about it I say “by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn” instead of just “by Duke Ellington.” I'm not quite ready to go full Strayhorn.

Metric has a fear of being boring that it seems to me all writers should cultivate. (Son Volt and Sleeper Agent are other bands that have it; Sleeper Agent's *Celabrasion* is particularly hyperactive and hook-laden in a good way.) Plus, just about everyone can benefit from a reminder that if you stumble you'll be eaten alive.

The liner notes to the Scholz *Slavonic Dances*, which is the best version of the symphony I've heard, quotes a contemporary review as saying it was like an injection of monkey glands into the drawing rooms of Europe. Subsequent research has shown that injecting monkey glands into drawing rooms affects only the smell of the drawing rooms, but I agree with the sentiment.

If you need to be revved down.

Cowboy Junkies, *The Trinity Session* / Emmylou Harris, *Wrecking Ball* / Ben Lee, *Breathing Tornadoes*

How many times have I listened to *The Trinity Session*? On how many formats, yo. If you somehow don't have this album, you'd best fix that.

Although Emmylou Harris is one of the worst people on earth to get caught trying to sing like, this album is indispensable.

Ben Lee is just good.

If you need to feel like you're losing your mind.

Jimi Hendrix, *Winterland* (Reissue)

You know how every ten years you decide that the record reviews in *Rolling Stone* magazine can't possibly be as bad as you remember, so you buy something on their recommendation? For me this time around it was *Winterland* (Reissue). *Rolling Stone*

says, “The four-CD box *Winterland* is culled from six Jimi Hendrix Experience shows at San Francisco’s Winterland Ballroom, recorded over three days in October 1968,” and gives it five stars. Done: I love Hendrix.

What would have been nice, or at least professional, for the reviewer to have mentioned is that while the four discs do have significant differences, they’re all variations of the same set list. That’s right: in thirty-six tracks, “Hey Joe,” “Foxy Lady,” and “Lover Man” show up three times each, and “Purple Haze” and “Red House” show up four times each. (Not all of the tracks were recorded at Winterland, either, but I don’t give a shit about that.) If you listen to all four discs on some kind of shuffle mode, songs you think you’re familiar with will suddenly go in directions you weren’t expecting or else just end, making you feel insane. What’s worse, Hendrix’s playing on all four discs is so perfect, and the things he says between songs and in the accompanying interview so charming, that you won’t be able to stop listening to the fucking thing.

If you need to be reminded of Europe.

Various

I recently moved back to the United States after a couple of years of living and working in Spain, so I find myself listening to lots of music I listened to there. Some of it is by bands I’d never heard of before, like Mesh (try *Fragmente*), or Sono (“All Those City Lights”), but a lot of it is bands that just don’t get played as often or as deeply in the United States, like the Cure (*The Cure*), Nick Cave (*Let Love In*), Jens Lekman (*Oh You’re So Silent, Jens*), or Pulp (*Different Class*).

Your results may vary.

If you need to listen to some Rolling Stones.

Which sometimes you do.

My favorite twenty-two Rolling Stones songs, test-marketed on various dogs and then presented chronologically:

From *Out of Our Heads*: “Play with Fire”

From *Let It Bleed*: “Gimme Shelter”

From *Black and Blue*: “Hot Stuff” and “Fool to Cry”

From *Some Girls*: “Miss You,” “Just My Imagination,” “Some Girls,” “Before They Make Me Run,” “Beast of Burden,” “Shattered”

From *Emotional Rescue*: “Dance (Pt. 1),” “Send It to Me,” “Down in the Hole,” “Indian Girl,” “Emotional Rescue,” “She’s So Cold,” and “All About You”

From *Tattoo You*: “Worried About You,” “Tops,” “Heaven,” “No Use in Crying,” “Waiting on a Friend”

If you need to seem deeper than you are.

Alan Hovhaness, *Music of Alan Hovhaness*, conducted by Rudolf Werthen

I only listen to this album when I’m trying to impress someone with how esoteric my taste in music is. But every time I do I remember how much I like it.

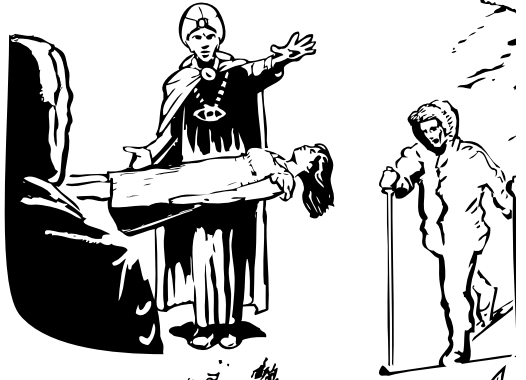
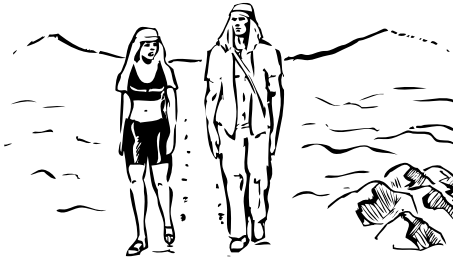
This playlist first appeared on the website largehearted boy and is reprinted with permission.

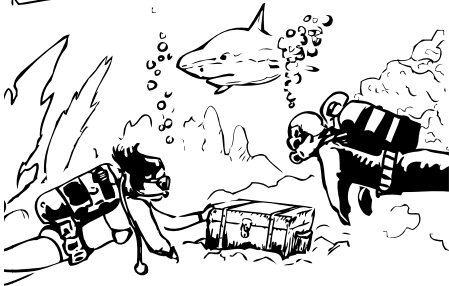
Questions and topics for discussion

1. What is the role of politics in fiction? Or in genre fiction? What is the role of reality versus fantasy? Can fiction ever be apolitical? At one point does it become just rude? At what point does this cease to be a single question?
2. Why are there real people in *Wild Thing*? Are there real people in *Wild Thing*? How can this question be rephrased to avoid being threatened with legal action?
3. How aware are most Americans of the Minnesota Boundary Waters? Or non-Americans. Anyone? The Boundary Waters?
4. What are some other parks this novel could have been set in?
5. How does this novel compare to traditional scenic mysteries where readers are given a tour of an exotic location, almost like a vacation, instead of focusing on a shithole like Ford?
6. What exactly is a “trade paperback”? Is it, like, a barter thing? Is another way I suppose you could ask this question whether it’s worth the price difference between this and a regular small paperback to get silly “topics for discussion” at the back?

7. Isn't it kind of punitive to take those "topics for discussion" out of the mass market paperback? I mean, how many pages do they take up?
8. If it's the number of pages that matter, why couldn't they just use a smaller font?
9. I've noticed some differences in the text between the hardcover and trade paperback. Is that supposed to be a question?
10. What are some other topics of conversation, given that this is obviously a good one but presumably there are other things in life worthy of discussing?
11. Can I trust the members of my book group?
12. Do I trust the members of my book group?
13. Do they trust me?
14. Do they know about my putting popcorn in the Blu-ray player after they forced me to watch *Sharktopus* when we were supposed to be discussing that new book about the wives of Henry VIII? Why did I do that if I hadn't even read that book?
15. What's the role of "bad language" in fiction? Is that even a serious question? I mean, am I fucking five? Doesn't anybody realize how much I love foul language in a novel?
16. And everywhere else? How many times do I have to address my friends and family members as "you sick fuck" before they get the idea?

17. Why isn't there more sex and violence in *Wild Thing*? Why isn't it all sex and violence? Is it true Bazell's next book is all sex and violence?
18. Am I the only person on earth reading this list right now? And is that a rhetorical question?
19. Why do I have so much laundry to do, given that I always wear the same outfit?
20. What's a better made-up word, *regin* or *premember*?
21. How have I gone this long without checking my text messages?
22. If you refer to a book as a "text message," is anyone more likely to read it?





Also by JOSH BAZELL

BEAT THE REAPER

“Outrageously funny...*Beat the Reaper* may be the most imaginative debut of the new year.”
—USA Today

“It’s just what the doctor ordered...Think *House* meets *The Sopranos*.”
—Entertainment Weekly

“Completely outrageous...genuinely entertaining.”
—New York Times Book Review

“A breakneck cross between a hospital drama, *The Godfather*, and a Quentin Tarantino film.”
—Bloomberg News

“*Beat the Reaper* is a hypochondriac’s nightmare but a reader’s dream...It’s too much fun and too much gore to take your eyes off the page.”
—Washington Post Book World

“Great fun...compulsively readable...You won’t be able to put it down until you finish.”
—National Public Radio



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