



AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSHUA GAYLORD:

Do you remember a time, when you fell, cutting the palms of your hands on the concrete and found some animal satisfaction at seeing the blood? Or perhaps a time when you felt a surging need to run, as fast as you could, with abandon, for no reason except to release the pressure? In ***When We Were Animals***, Joshua Gaylord tempts you with those feelings and then plunges you deep within them.

The book is a story of a young girl named Lumen, living in a small town in the mid-west. It is as normal as a town gets except for one troubling fact. When a child hits puberty they begin a period of wildness, which is dubbed “breaching.” During the full moon the breachers run naked through the streets, fully immersed in the emotions that the chemical haze of puberty floods them with...or perhaps it is something darker?

Lumen, as a character, begins as bright light in the darkness. She fears her own breaching and spends her childhood using the meticulousness of ordering everything in her life into lists, maps, and lines. The story is written from her perspective as she recounts her life as a teenager

and Joshua manages to write her as all at once fragile and unbreakable. I really love the haunted tone and the brutal descriptions he uses throughout the book. It manages to make you remember those moments in your own life when you felt alone and frightened or perhaps those moments of wild madness you might not want to think about. Lumen describes her days as she watches as her friends begin to breach and pull away from her in their own search for meaning amidst the night where they claw, howl, run, and mate for the sheer feeling of it all. It is a vibrant, lonely, and dark look at the coming of age story.

Joshua was kind enough to answer a few questions about his upcoming book.

Why did you write this book? Where did the inspiration come from?

My publisher would hate for me to call this a werewolf book, and it's really not technically a werewolf book—but I have to confess that it's my personal version of a werewolf book. And what's most appealing about the werewolf mythology is the fantasy of giving over completely and unashamedly to the instinctual and animalistic. Especially for those of us who are overly self-conscious, deeply neurotic, shy, withdrawn, people-pleasing, and ritualized, there's always that tinder of rebellion that wants to be free from all our self-imposed restrictions and habits. In large part, the book is about that freedom—about the savage indifference to other people and to the world at large: an indifference which we imagine, in our secret and most reserved thoughts, might be very liberating. I've always thought so, at least, ever since I was a timid, painfully polite, and socially straight-jacketed kid who daydreamed about saying GO FUCK YOURSELF to the world. So I guess this book is part wish-fulfillment fantasy and part investigation into the beast-nature I suspect everyone has at the core.

This is the second of your books that I have read and both were written from female perspectives. Is these a reason you chose female voices for these stories?

I don't know a whole lot about men. I never get their voices quite right. Much of the time they come across sounding like cowboys or Nietzsche rather than real life people. What draws me to teenage girls as protagonists is that they cannot be over-dreamed. You can write teenage girls to sound like fairies or warriors or 40-year-old divorcees or Hitler or cowboys or Nietzsche—and, no matter what, it seems believable, because girls are taught by our culture from a very young age to be grifters and shapeshifters. They are taught to design an arsenal of masks for every situation. In *When We Were Animals*, our protagonist, Lumen, is deeply proficient with her masks; the drama of the book derives from her being compelled to take those masks off—and taking true account of what's underneath.

What was your favorite part of writing When we were animals?

I really loved writing all the stuff surrounding Lumen's bibliophilia. I'm not sure how exciting they are to read, but my favorite passages to write were the ones where Lumen spends time searching through encyclopedias at the library of her school: doing research on saints or figuring out all the

derivative meanings of her name. While she may not understand the mathematical equations for luminosity, for example, she finds the figures themselves beautiful and expressive—and I like to get into the heads of people like that. They find stories everywhere. I guess my other favorite parts to write were the dirty ones. Not because they are titillating, but rather just the opposite: I enjoyed frustrating and defusing those scenes by making much of the sexuality gross and obstetrical. Maybe it was a little sadistic toward my readers, but I got a kick out of Cronenberg-ing the eroticism of traditional paranormal romance.

How much of yourself is in the story? Is there a character that you relate to?

I think I was very much like Lumen as a kid. I shared her shyness, her over-achievement, her cerebral withdrawal from the world, her desperate fear of disappointing anyone. I empathize with her desire always to do the right thing—and not because of some personal or even impersonal moral code, but just because she always wants the gold star for correctness. That's me all over. Maybe I'd make a good soldier. But I also share Lumen's tumultuous internal life. Despite (or maybe even because of) her relentless efforts to please, she discovers growing inside her a darker and more venal personality. When I was a kid, I was very much a choirboy on the outside—and I did a great job of hiding the things that were going on in my brain and in my guts. Lumen isn't allowed to hide her dark side—and I have to admit that I'm a little envious of that.

What does your writing process look like?

I do my best work when I can get into a solid, ritualized routine. On the weekends, I get up at 7:15, check my email for 15 minutes, and then write two pages—however long that takes me (but usually an hour or two). Then I take a short break to play whatever computer game I'm in the middle of at the moment. Then another two pages, which generally takes me up to 11:30—and that's when I break for lunch. A quick walk to Subway for a ham and swiss, sour cream and onion Lay's, Cherry Coke, along with whatever book I'm reading. Belly full of sandwich, brain full of better writers' narratives, I rush home and generate two more pages right after lunch, at which point I feel satisfied with my day's work and can shift into full leisure mode. If I can keep that routine up, that's six pages a day: twelve pages a week during the school year and up to 42 pages a week in the summer when I'm practically a shut in. It's not always easy to get that creative tap running at such a heavy flow, but once it's started the momentum carries you a long way.

What are some of your favorite authors? Who has inspired you to write?

William Faulkner is, secretly and not so secretly, lurking behind everything I write. With the exception maybe of James Joyce, I don't think there's any writer who has ever equaled his influence on me. That's in terms of style, at least. Topically, *When We Were Animals* owes a lot to writers like Shirley Jackson and V.C. Andrews—those writers who give young girls full credit for being just as creepy, sociopathic, sadistic, violent, treacherous and libidinous as any man. Books like *Flowers in the Attic* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* show us Victorian-styled girls who cozy up against

real abomination. There's no denying that those masterpieces are always in the background of Lumen's story.

The original version of this interview was conducted by *Nerdy Kitten Pants*.

NINE QUESTIONS ABOUT **WHEN WE WERE ANIMALS**:

1. Names seem especially significant in the book. Why do you think so many characters change their names over the course of the story? How do you interpret the fact that some people change their names on purpose while other people are stuck with the names given to them?
2. Also on the topic of names, our protagonist is fascinated by her own name: Lumen. We discover over the course of the book that the name has a few different meanings. What are the different meanings of Lumen's name, and how do they reflect her as a character? Also, why do you think the author holds back from explaining all the meanings at once and holds some back until later in the book?
3. Do you think Lumen is a good mother or a bad mother? How do you think she would characterize herself as a mother? How about as a wife?
4. What are some of the differences or similarities you see between the teenage Lumen and the adult Lumen (or Ann)? Do you think she has changed dramatically in the interim between her adolescence and her adulthood? What events do you imagine have occurred in the space between those two timeframes?
5. Sex and violence are key elements of the characters' coming-of-age stories. What do these elements represent to the teenagers (or the adults) in the novel? What are Lumen's feelings about sex and violence? Do her feelings change over the course of her young life? How is her sexuality different as it is expressed with Peter Meechum, Blackhat Roy and her husband?
6. Is Lumen's relationship with her father what you would consider healthy? How does their relationship change as she grows up? Why do you think the author found it necessary to have Lumen's father die at the end of the book? Are there interesting similarities between Lumen's father and her teacher Mr. Hunter?
7. There are many passages that reflect Lumen's personal researches: her explorations of dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other books. What do you think these passages tell us about her? Why do you think the author chose to use this method of characterizing Lumen? What do these scenes show us that other scenes (interactions with other characters, for example) do not?
8. Lumen has a choice of romantic relationships as a teenager: Peter Meechum and Blackhat Roy Ruggle. What do each of these boys represent to her, and why do you think she made the choices she did? Which one would you want to be your boyfriend, and what does this choice say about you?
9. What role does religion play in Lumen's life? What are her beliefs surrounding God, magic, and superstition--and how do those beliefs inform who she is?