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Lisa Kunik Interviews Antoine Wilson, Author of *The Interloper*

Antoine Wilson's debut novel *The Interloper* follows Owen Patterson's quest to avenge the senseless murder of his wife's brother, CJ. He poses as Lily Hazelton—a woman seeking an incarcerated penpal—in the hopes of developing a relationship over letters with the murderer, only to break his heart. As Owen begins to believe in Lily so do we, only to lead us to the book's unexpected, and yet inevitable conclusion. According to *Booklist*, "The pleasures of this wry debut novel lie not in wondering if things will turn out badly for Owen but in how badly they will go and how unreliable his narrative really is."

I caught up with Wilson on his reading tour somewhere between Los Angeles and San Mateo, California.—LK

Lisa Kunik: Jorge Luis Borges's story, "The Interloper" opens with a disclaimer; the narrator will recount his tale conscientiously but foresees yielding to the temptation to embellish or exaggerate. He plays the role of interloper in his telling of his story. Your narrator, Owen Patterson, tells us his story in a straightforward first-person narrative. Without giving too much away, we begin to find the narrator—who we have grown to trust—succumbing to the forces of the fictional world he creates. Was it a challenge to write a novel with a narrator who proves himself unreliable?

Antoine Wilson: Writing any kind of novel is a challenge! Owen's lack of reliability was built-in from the start, so I guess the challenge was determining how it would play out, how much it would "show"—an unconscious process, for the most part. A few years ago a friend of mine pointed out that all first-person narrators are unreliable—it's just a matter of degree. I've always been interested in narratives that involve some kind of self-presentation. Ostensibly, anyway, this is Owen's written account.

LK: There is a systematic nature to the narrator's stream of thought and action—from the opening line where the narrator begins, "My name is Owen Patterson," as straightforward an introduction as they come—establishing Owen as a seemingly steadfast and predictable character. In the process of writing the book, how did you resolve that Owen would go out on such a limb to pose as a woman? Can grief, and even more so, revenge, push anyone to extreme action?

AW: That's funny. I definitely wanted a straightforward kind of opening to establish a patina of normalcy from the start. Of course, the clues are all there in the opening paragraph. Who calls himself "a solid B"? I knew from the start what Owen's plan would be—in fact, I knew it before I knew who Owen would be. I don't usually start with that kind of premise, but that's how it happened. I think grief and revenge can push people to extremes, sure, especially when family is involved; that said, Owen's pursuing this particular plan is more of a sign that he's got a bolt loose.

LK: Owen—a character you created—creates a character of his own. As a writer, that's a lot of hats to wear. How did you negotiate these multiple levels of character?

AW: In outlining Lily Hazelton's characteristics I tried to create the kind of woman Owen might create. In other words, I had to know Owen pretty well before I could begin to know what Lily was



going to be like. Once I got rolling with her, though, it was mainly a balancing act—when was the scrim going to be transparent, with Owen’s own characteristics and concerns shining through, and when was it going to be opaque, with Lily seeming more like an independent, fleshed-out character.

LK: As I read, I found myself sympathizing most with the fictitious character of Lily Hazelton. It is almost as though her “sincerity” draws the reader in. Did you find yourself also allying with Lily, or were you always firmly planted in Owen’s head?

AW: Well, sympathy for Lily belongs only to the reading experience. What I mean to say is that in some sense she stands on equal footing with the other characters in the book, but to me she exists only as a fabrication of Owen’s. Any sympathy I have for her is displaced sympathy for Owen. But lots of readers have told me that Lily was their favorite character, etc., so that’s been interesting.

LK: I felt like the end of the book was dictated by Owen growing to believe Lily the way the reader does. Did you know where the book was going to end when you started?

AW: Not really. I knew from the start that Owen’s plan was ill-advised, and that things were not going to end well. I had a sense, too, that a meltdown of some sort was imminent. As for how the very end went down...that came about 2/3 of the way through the first draft.

LK: The novel is clearly set in Los Angeles (at least to this former Angeleno) from the descriptions of the Santa Monica Pier to the “Hamlet by the Sea” Owen and Patty live in. Los Angeles is a loaded setting that has been used by other authors as a character in and of itself, such as in Kate Braverman’s *Lithium for Medea* and Joyce Carol Oates’s *Blonde*. In your novel you play against type. You set your characters in Los Angeles yet they could be anywhere in suburban America, or urban America for that matter, without upsetting the story. Why choose such a loaded setting and not play with it?

AW: For a lot of people who live here, L.A. is normal. It doesn’t feel like a loaded setting. I wasn’t particularly interested in writing an L.A. book just yet, or at least one that takes on some of the larger questions of living in this place, but I did want the story to feel authentic, so I set it here, where I live. Call it laziness, but I didn’t see any reason to set it in, say, Portland or Ketchikan. Someday I’d like to write a big L.A. novel, a book that takes on the place in some way, but I’m still trying to find the right, um, idiom.

LK: Owen’s wife and her family see CJ or his absence in everything. With loss, does what was one has lost become in a sense even more present by the fact that it isn’t there?

AW: Sure. People gain great significance sometimes just by dying. It’s a shame they can’t stick around to enjoy it. What we’ve lost is always more significant to us than what we’ve got, especially in the world of literature and art. Look at Proust. You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone—it’s the one thing Joni Mitchell and Cinderella can agree on.

LK: I read that you yourself lost a family member to murder. One of the writer’s jobs is to find a narrator he can commit to. Do you think you would have been able to commit to Owen without your life experience behind you? Was it difficult to separate your experience from that of your narrator’s?

AW: I wouldn’t have chosen to write this novel if my half-brother hadn’t been murdered. That said, it wasn’t too difficult to separate my experience from Owen’s. The book and my life are tangent and circle—I shaved off just enough to keep the engine running.

LK: The question everyone is dying to ask. In your research for this book, did you or did you not wear thong underwear? Did it give you insight into the female psyche?

AW: No comment x 2.

LK: On the note of the thong, there is almost a superhero quality to the narrator, dressed in his wife’s thong and surrounded by software manuals, a scanner, and images of his deceased cousin. He fights evil—in the form of a one Joseph Raven, connoting the predatory beasts of Hitchcock’s

“The Birds”—with Photoshop and the written word. Did you read comic books as a child? Were you influenced by television shows or movies?

AW: Wow, that’s interesting. I’ve never been much of a superhero person. Most of the comics I read back in the day were *Richie Rich* and *Casper* type things, followed by a fanatical devotion to *Mad* magazine. A few years back I finally read [Don Quixote](#), which is an amazing book, and for some reason it took me this long to realize that *Knight Rider* was a recapitulation of all those knight-errant stories. Occasionally I let Owen see himself in that light—coming to the rescue and all that. Except that instead of powers, he’s got issues. Ha.

LK: I found humor in some of the darker moments of the book. One of the first rules of comedy—at least according to Lucille Ball—is that as we watch a character struggle, we laugh when things go from bad to worse. The line between horror and comedy is tenuous. When you started out, did you intend for the book to be funny?

AW: Yes. As a matter of fact, I was initially surprised when some readers didn’t find it funny. I suppose the question of humor relies in part on the distance between the reader and Owen, the degree to which they sympathize with him, the degree to which they feel betrayed, etc., all of which is meant to be in constant negotiation.

LK: In writing this book, were there any authors you looked to who have dealt with characters coping with death?

AW: Not really. But several years back I wrote a children’s/YA book on coping with death, and for that I read several different books. The one that stands out in my memory is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s classic [On Death and Dying](#), which I found fascinating. In terms of fiction, I’m often drawn to those books in which a sort of emotional overflow afflicts a hyper-rational narrator, from [Remains of the Day](#) to [Pale Fire](#).

LK: CJ’s senseless murder hovers over the text like a dark rain cloud, occasionally casting a few drops to remind the reader of Owen’s, and more importantly his wife and his wife’s family’s plight. We live in a time of senseless violence. Do we create our own Lily Hazelton’s to cope in the world we live in?

AW: If you’re asking whether we pour our hopes and losses into fictional proxies to cope with our impotence in a violent world, the answer is a resounding yes. Turn on the TV. Open the newspaper. From Jessica Lynch to Paris Hilton, the list is endless. We live in an insanely complex nexus of fictionalized personae, all of which serve various unconscious needs.

LK: You’ve been a contributing editor to [A Public Space](#). In Brigid Hughes opening remarks in the first issue she cites the source for the name of the journal, a remark made by the novelist Aleksander Hemon in a [BOMB](#) interview when asked if he trusted books. He replied, “No. But I love books more than ever. Because I learned that books don’t represent ‘truth.’ Rather they open a space, a public space, in which that truth can be negotiated.” Are his remarks relative to your book and making sense of your personal experiences?

AW: Yes, and one question being negotiated in *The Interloper* is whether it is, as Owen puts it, “the noblest mistake to see humanity in everyone.” There’s an ethical collision. Of course we want to see humanity in everyone; we want to believe that everyone is capable of feeling, for instance. But what about someone like Raven? Is he indeed unfeeling? Is the point of justice to make someone feel what they’ve done, or is it simply to eliminate them from the equation, separate them from society? I don’t know the answers to these questions, but in this novel I tried to open a space in which they could be negotiated, albeit in an oblique way.

LK: As a writer living and working in Los Angeles, what kind of literary moment do you see happening there? In a city living under the shadow of the Hollywood sign, where does the novelist stand?

AW: I’ve heard that the Hollywood sign casts no shadow. Seriously though, being a fiction writer in L.A. is tricky. You feel elevated and debased at once. Elevated because many people here hold books, and book-writing, in high regard. Debased because just as many people see books as a

means to an end. They need “material” for their “projects.” As far as a literary moment, I’m afraid you’ll have to ask someone closer to the center of things, like David Ulin. I’m too focused on my little postage stamp over here to characterize the whole big moment. I will say, though, that there’s lots of creative freedom here—the place is too spread out and schizophrenic to coalesce into any dominant aesthetic.

LK: Any advice to aspiring novelists on cranking out that first book?

AW: Read widely. Ignore the so-called market. Ass in chair. Risk something.

Lisa Kunik is a Brooklyn-based writer originally from Los Angeles. Her interviews have appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail* and her short fiction on [LostWriters.net](#).



Antoine Wilson is the author of the novel *The Interloper*. His work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, and *Best New American Voices*, among other publications, and he is a contributing editor of *A Public Space*. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and recipient of a Carol Houck Smith Fiction Fellowship from the University of Wisconsin, he currently lives in Los Angeles. More info at [antoinewilson.com](#).

[Callie Miller](#) interviews [Antoine Wilson](#).

And click below to view the trailer for *The Interloper*.



