Internal Faculty Reassigned Time Award Cover Sheet

THE ZONE: A NOVEL

A proposal submitted to:
NMU Faculty Grants Committee

By

Matt Bell
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29 January 2013

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<th>Years at NMU:</th>
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<td>Total Reassigned Time Requested:</td>
<td>4 credits</td>
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<td>Semester Requested:</td>
<td>Fall 2013</td>
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<td>Dates of Previous support (indicate if none):</td>
<td>Winter 2013</td>
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Abstract

I propose to utilize NMU's Reassigned Time Award to continue writing my third novel (and fifth book of fiction), currently titled *The Zone*, which begins within the city of Detroit's legally- and morally-complicated metal scrap industry supported by the scavenging of the approximately 90,000 abandoned or vacant properties inside the city's center—an area that becomes known, in the jargon of the novel, as the titular "zone," an allusion to the exclusion zone that surrounds the site of Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Through this setting the novel engages and explores some of the challenging social, political, economic, and cultural forces at work in the city as well as broader areas of inquiry like the country's current economic recession, positioned here amid the effects of globalization and environmental catastrophe. These macro-level concerns set the stage for a character-driven literary detective novel, its plot set off by the protagonist's rescuing of a child endangered by an act of inexplicable violence, accidentally uncovered while the protagonist was engaged in an illegal salvage operation. Through this novel, I am continuing my exploration into various traditions of both literary and genre fiction, as well as extending the rich history of American literature exploring place and its effect on its inhabitants.

This Reassigned Time Award will provide me with additional time to progress the writing and revision of this manuscript, as well as the remaining research necessary for its completion.
1. Introduction

   a. Goals

   I propose to utilize NMU's Reassigned Time Award to continue writing my third novel (and fifth book of fiction), currently titled *The Zone*, which begins within the city of Detroit's legally- and morally-complicated metal scrap industry supported by the scavenging of the approximately 90,000 abandoned or vacant properties inside the city's center—an area that becomes known, in the jargon of the novel, as the titular "zone," an allusion to the exclusion zone that surrounds the site of Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Through this setting the novel engages and explores some of the challenging social, political, economic, and cultural forces at work in the city—including the history of the automotive industry, which helped caused both the rapid growth of Detroit (once the fastest-growing city in the country) and the eventual population decline that created this emptying city center—as well as broader areas of inquiry like the country's current economic recession, positioned here amid the effects of globalization and environmental catastrophe. These macro-level concerns set the stage for a character-driven literary detective novel, its plot set off by the protagonist's rescuing of a child endangered by an act of inexplicable violence, accidentally uncovered while the protagonist was engaged in an illegal salvage operation.

   Through this novel, I am continuing my own artistic and scholarly work seeking how to combine, progress, and subvert various traditions of both literary and genre fiction, in this case attempting to advance the form as bravely as other contemporary literary fictions built upon the
tropes of the detective novel have: These would include novels like Denis Johnson's *Nobody Move*, Brian Evenson's *Last Days*, Donald Ray Pollock's *The Devil All the Time*, and Laird Hunt's *The Impossibly*, among many others. (Stylistically and structurally, the novel is also inspired by such novels as Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, Eugene Marten's *Waste*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.) While my novel's exact aims and effects are different than can be found in any one of these novels, I think it is helpful to see how my novel is not just a standalone project, but also a work functioning as part of a larger and ongoing literary conversation.

American literature also has a rich history of exploring place and its effect on its inhabitants—do we shape the land, or does the land shape us?—and therefore I am continuing to research the history and the mythology of Detroit, with the hope that this research will not only enrich the prose of my novel but also deepen its engagement with its subject, which now includes not just a consideration of the "body" of the city—its gorgeous but endangered architectural past—but also the ways the city's recent decline might be used to mirror or at least complement the depiction of the deteriorating physical and mental condition of my protagonist as he delves ever deeper into the perhaps unsolvable mysteries at the heart of the novel's plot.

b. *Continuation of an existing project*

I am currently working on the novel with the support of a Reassigned Time Award for the Winter 2013 semester, which has thankfully allowed me to add several extra writing sessions per week to my normal writing schedule. In my previous application, I initially projected a completion date for this draft of mid-2013, and I happy to report that, barring unseen complications, I will meet or beat that deadline: the draft is currently approximately 140,000
words in manuscript, and I am now working to shape and polish those nearly 500 pages into a finished first draft.

My work on this novel began in mid-May 2012, several months before my hire date at NMU. During the Fall 2012 semester, I added new writing totaling approximately 50,000 words to the manuscript and completed most of the initial research necessary for this stage of the process. Continued good use of my writing and research time—now expanded by this winter's Reassigned Time Award, and hopefully continued under another for Fall 2013—will allow me not only to complete this draft but also to begin the rewriting process to prepare the manuscript for submission and publication. It's perhaps risky to assume every creative project will follow a similar timeline, but my last novel took approximately two years to reach the point where it could be submitted to publishers, which means that I most likely have at least a year of work remaining on this book before I reach that same milestone.

c. Outcomes

The outcome of this project will eventually be a finished novel, at least 60,000-100,000 words in length (although, as noted above, the manuscript is currently longer than that). In addition, past experience suggests that it will hopefully result in numerous magazine and journal publications, as my previous novel In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods produced five chapter-length excerpts published or forthcoming in Conjunctions, Fairy Tale Review, Puerto del Sol, Guernica, and Unsaid, with the excerpt in Unsaid also earning the magazine's annual Joan Scott Memorial Fiction Award.

As I continue to research and draft the novel, I have also started to make plans for possible additional self-contained essays or articles to be submitted to professional literary
journals or other publications. This project has already led me to propose new panels and presentations on aspects of the work and its aesthetic and intellectual concerns: For example, I recently wrote and submitted a conference panel proposal with the fiction writer Laura van den Berg exploring "the role genre can play in literary fiction and strategies for utilizing genre in inventive and illuminating ways," as well as another presentation proposal written with fiction writer Anne Valente and poet Callista Buchen exploring how narratives in literature inform the public perception of the environments where the stories are set.

d. Qualifications

As a practicing and publishing writer and as a teacher of fiction, I am qualified to pursue this project. My most recent novel, *In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods*, will be published in June 2013 by Soho Press and has already attracted positive advance attention, including receiving a forthcoming starred review in *Library Journal* and being chosen as the June selection for The Nervous Breakdown Book Club.

I am also the author of a novella, *Cataclysm Baby*, and a collection of short stories, *How They Were Found*, as well as a co-written genre novel titled *The Last Garrison*, published under the pen name Matthew Beard. Together, these previous books have been positively reviewed in such publications as *The Believer, American Book Review, Fiction Writers Review, The Rumpus, Foreword Reviews, The Colorado Review, Flavorwire, and Critical Mob*. In addition, since 2008 my stories have appeared in magazines such as *Conjunctions, Hayden's Ferry Review, Gulf Coast, Redivider, American Short Fiction, and Willow Springs*, and my story "Dredge" was anthologized in *Best American Mystery Stories 2010*, while my story "His Last Great Gift" was a notable story in *Best American Short Stories 2010* and in that year's Pushcart Prize anthology.
More recently stories have been anthologized (or will be) in *The &NOW Awards 2: The Best Innovative Writing* and *30 Under 30: An Anthology of Innovative Fiction by Younger Writers*.

e. **Benefits**

   The primary benefit to my personal professional development would be allowing me additional time to more quickly complete my next book-length work of fiction. My literary agent (Kirby Kim at William Morris Endeavor) is awaiting my completion of the manuscript, and my current editor (Mark Doten at Soho Press) has repeatedly expressed interest in the manuscript (including during a phone conversation in January 2013), which will hopefully help facilitate the process of going smoothly from finished manuscript to accepted book.

   I also believe that there is a direct benefit to my department and my students, in that my further exploration of how to incorporate genre influences into my literary fiction will help make me a better teacher of fiction for our particular student body, if only because so many of our creative writing students come to NMU with the intention of writing various kinds of genre fiction. And they're not alone in their admiration for these types of stories: James Gunn, professor emeritus of English at the University of Kansas, recently argued in the *New York Times* that "the most effective social documents these days are genre novels—crime novels, for instance," stating that genre novels are uniquely suited to "isolating the issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, climate change, environment, governance, economics, catastrophe and whatever other problems the present embodies or the future may bring." I believe literary fiction's engagement with genre is an important and vital strain of the fiction being written today, and this project will allow me to more fully add my voice to the ongoing conversation.
2. Methods

By the time the Fall 2013 semester begins, I hope to already have begun the editing and revision phase of this manuscript. Therefore, this Reassigned Time Award will allow me to redouble my efforts to take the book from first draft to submittable manuscript by making available new blocks of time in addition to my normally-scheduled daily writing sessions.

All of the currently-planned stages of the process can be pursued here in Marquette. Although an exact timetable for completion of the entire writing process is difficult to guarantee, previous experience suggests that a second draft of the novel will take between eight and ten months, which means that a Reassigned Time Award would support approximately half of that effort.

3. Reassigned Time

Because this is a large and time-consuming project that will most likely span additional semesters, I request four hours of reassigned time as a credit release for Fall 2013. This will provide me with approximately fifteen additional hours per week to devote specifically to this project, which will significantly increase my ability to finish this book-length manuscript in a shorter span of time without compromising my goals for quality and achievement.

Conclusion

I have attached, as appendices, a works cited page listing the texts mentioned above, as well as a current curriculum vitae. Thank you for your consideration. I hope to have your continued support as I pursue this project in the months ahead and in the Fall 2013 semester.
WORK CITED


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Education
2010: MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction)
   Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH.
2006: BA in English
   Oakland University, Rochester, MI.

Books Contracted
*In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods*. New York City, NY: Soho Press,
   June 2013. (novel)

Books Published
   (novel)

Academic Teaching Positions
2012-present: Assistant Professor of English. Northern Michigan University. Marquette, MI.
2011-2012: Lecturer. The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
2010-2011: Visiting Writer. Greenhills School, Ann Arbor, MI.
2008-2010: Graduate Instructor. Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH.

Current Editorial Positions
2010-present: Senior Editor. Dzanc Books, Westland, MI.

Selected Awards & Honors
The Joan Scott Memorial Fiction Award, for "The Stagger Pained Into Her Step" (2012).
Best American Mystery Stories selection, for "Dredge" (2010).
Best American Short Stories notable story, for "His Last Great Gift" (2010).
Pushcart Prize special mention, for "His Last Great Gift" (2010).

Recent Journal Publications

**Selected Anthologized Fiction**


**Recent Invited Readings**

January 2013: University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH.
November 2012: University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, KY.
November 2012: Three Tents Reading Series, Washington, D.C.
November 2012: 510 Reading Series, Baltimore, MD.
June 2012: Sarabande Reading Series, Louisville, KY.
April 2012: City College, New York City, NY.
April 2012: UMaine New Writing Series, University of Maine, Onoro, ME.
April 2012: Creative Writing Symposium, Morehead State University, Morehead, KY.
April 2012: Great Lakes Writer Series, Saginaw Valley State University, Saginaw, MI.
April 2012: On the Run Lecture Series, Lake Forest College, Chicago, IL.
February 2012: Fordham University, New York City, NY.
December 2011: Brown University, Providence, RI.

**Recent Presentations**

October 2012: "Innovative Publishing Panel." State of the Book Festival, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. (Panelist)
June 2012: "Ten Fragments on Online Publishing, Editing, and Reading." Bear Creek Writers' Conference, Boyne City, MI. (Lecturer/Panelist)
February 2012: "Villains and Killers and Criminals, Oh My: Representing Evildoers in Literary Fiction." AWP Conference, Chicago, IL. (Panelist)
February 2012: "Connecting with Readers via Your Website and Social Media." AWP Conference, Chicago, IL. (Panelist)
April 2011: "Everything Worth Saying is Worth Saying Twice: The Power of Repetition." Conversations and Connections Conference, Washington, DC. (Lecturer/Panelist)