

Q&A with Kevin Allardice

on *family genus species*



Q. *In **Family Genus Species**, how did you tackle a protagonist with a gender different than your own? How do you gut-check her experiences, especially with men?*

a. Early on, when I imagined it as a short story, I had all these false starts with a male protagonist. The character felt too much like myself, and I began to dread the project just a few pages in. Meanwhile, the character of Vee had been drifting in and out of a few unfinished projects for years; she began so long ago now that I'm not entirely sure where/how she started, and how I initially developed her voice, including those gut-checking moments. But as soon as I got rid of the male protagonist and had her walk into the backyard, the fledgling short story took off into a short novel. It felt freeing, getting to set my own set of assumptions and expectations behind. This answer didn't really answer the "how" part of your question, so for the "how," I guess I can say that there's a rather awkward scene in the middle of the book a version of which I'd tried to write for years from a different perspective; as soon as I give that scene to her, and understood it from her perspective, I felt things coming together.

Q. *Satire is never as easy as it looks. What are the challenges there, and what extra opportunities does it allow? And what's not fair game?*

a. I think one of the challenges (and opportunities) is to avoid using humor to simply validate one's views, but instead to challenge or question them. It's easy to satirize systems of thought I keep at a distance. It's more interesting to find the fissures and failings in a worldview more intimate. I wrote a great deal of this at the end of 2014; the Black Lives Matter protests had begun and suddenly I saw the white liberal community around me fearfully clinging to yesterday's status quo while still trying to maintain their progressive bona fides. That cognitive dissonance interested me, and gave itself quite naturally to this particular mode. I'm not sure what's not fair game, though I suspect that targeting sacred cows doesn't work when it only serves to validate one's own prejudices.

Q. *How do you think about politics in contemporary writing? With so many calls to activism, is it an author's responsibility to illustrate society's troubles or are society's troubles rich territory for conflict and character? In other words, can character and plot be effectively put in service of a political agenda?*

a. Since ideology is based in—or at least aimed at—ideals, and characters emerge from contradiction, I think a character's politics can be a great way to frame their failings, how they might fall short of their own ideals. More specifically, though, given today's climate, it would seem myopic to present characters in an apolitical bubble. Instead of characters and plot being put in service of a political agenda, I think it's more interesting to incorporate politics to articulate some of the external pressures each character feels.

Q. Which books or writers influenced your writing in **Family Genus Species**?

a.

Donal Antrim's *The Hundred Brothers* is one I think about often. It's a short novel about a hundred (or, really, ninety-nine) brothers who get together to decide what to do with their father's ashes. What begins as absurdist and hilarious eventually (d)evolves into something almost akin to myth or ritual. I also found myself thinking about the 1962 Luis Bunuel film *The Exterminating Angel*, about people who find themselves unable to leave a dinner party. It begins as satire and bubbles over into something nightmarish. Both *The Hundred Brothers* and *The Exterminating Angel* are also confined to one domestic setting that, when there's no escape and enough pressure is applied, begins to feel unfamiliar and a even a little scary.

Q. **Family Genus Species** could be described as a novella. How did you arrive at its proper length?

a.

I remember a sentence in Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* about the manuscript for a young writer's first novel being exactly 250 pages. I remember that—having read that book well over a decade ago—because I've been increasingly aware of my own preconceptions that conflate page count with genre/category. When I was twenty years old, trying to write a novel for the first time (blessedly unread by another human), I desperately aimed for that 250 page count, as that in my mind was a criterion for a "real" novel. I'm not—perhaps never will be—free of that anxiety, but the flourishing of independent presses that have given platforms for shorter works gave me the confidence to let the work find it's own shape. Had I tried to write this years earlier, I'm sure I would have either maimed it into a short story or tacked a hundred unneeded pages onto it just call it a novel. (After writing the above answer, I looked for and failed to find that sentence in *Wonder Boys*.)

Q. What's next? What are you working on now?

a.

I'm trying to finish a novel that I began in 2008, which takes place on an imaginary island whose population has long been convinced that their homeland was the real inspiration for Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. More specifically, it's about a failed dramaturge who now works as an immigration officer, conducting the island's version of marriage-based green-card interviews, on this island whose whole sense of national identity is tangled up in ideas of theater and performance. It's not a long novel, but it's been a beast to wrestle with.

Kevin Allardice

Family Genus Species

147 pages

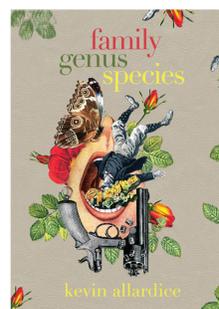
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