

BEN LERNER

**A biographical essay by
Andy Fabens**

December 5, 2017

As befits a subject who is just 38 years of age, the biographical material on Ben Lerner is pretty much confined to gleanings from the Internet. It was, however, an engaging search, starting, of course with his Wikipedia Bio and following many links and other leads.

Lerner currently teaches at Brooklyn College, a unit of the City University of New York (CUNY), where he was named Distinguished Professor of English in 2016. He lives in one of the upscale enclaves of Brooklyn, is married and has a young school age daughter. His wife is Ariana Mangual, is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers.

His biographical summaries invariably begin with the statement that he was born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. This is true, but somewhat misleading in implying a down home Midwestern background. His parents were psychologists at the Menninger Institute (which has since re-located to Houston). His mother is Harriet Lerner, a celebrity psychologist and author of books in the self-help vein relating to the empowerment of women. I watched a recent TED talk of hers on YouTube: she a warm, witty, somewhat self-deprecating speaker with sound, common sense advice on effective interpersonal relations. She is actually originally from Brooklyn with her major academic credentials from CUNY. So, in a sense, Ben Lerner, by ending up in Brooklyn is back home again.

Lerner attended public school in Topeka and went to Brown University, graduating in 2001, with a major in political theory. He then stayed at Brown for an MFA in creative writing.

He began writing poetry in earnest while an undergraduate and continued in his post grad year, so that by the time he got his MFA, he was well on his way to his first publication, a cycle of 52 sonnets called *The Lichtenberg Figures*. I watched a YouTube interview in which he described his creative process in producing those sonnets. It had a lot of the same sort of self-deprecating charm of his mother's TED talk. He described how the first 4 or 5 poems more or less wrote themselves,

very easy, but then there followed 3 or 4 years of grinding hard work to complete the cycle. He also mentioned that they did not really start out as sonnets, but that he gradually came to feel the 14-line format was ideal for the things he was expressing, and imposed that form on all the poems in that cycle. One of those sonnets I found and read is a meditation entitled “The Poetic Establishment Has Co-opted Contradiction.” Already he was into literature about literature. I just dipped ever so slightly into his poetry. Interesting he should speak of the “poetic establishment” as “co-opting contradiction.” That sounds like something that makes him uneasy and yet it seems to me that contradictions and incongruous juxtapositions are his fundamental stock in trade.

After Brown, Lerner got a Fulbright Scholarship for a year in Madrid. He was there for the famous train bombings of 2004 and worked on his second poetry collection *Angle of Yaw*, published in 2006. A third poetry collection *Mean Free Path* was published in 2010. He credits his growing up in Topeka as providing significant inspiration for his poetry, commenting that it was an essentially violent place. Violent how? he was asked. Violence of the Columbine sort, he replied; and left it at that. Lerner holds the disasters and atrocities of our times close to his heart.

He turned to fiction with the publication of *Leaving the Atocha Station* in 2011. This novel is clearly a rumination on his year as a Fulbright Scholar in Madrid: 2003-4. I listened to the audio, with Lerner himself reading.

Blurb from the audio: Adam Gordon is a brilliant, if highly unreliable young American poet on a prestigious fellowship in Madrid, struggling to establish his sense of self and his relationship to art. Instead of following the dictates of his fellowship, Adam’s ‘research’ becomes a meditation on the possibility of the genuine in the arts and beyond

Read by the author in a clear, steady monotone. The characterization of this work as a meditation is apt. The style of Hemingway came through to me from time to time: Simple phrases linked together with “and ... and ... and.”. He pronounces “poem” as one syllable: “pome”. He mispronounces “aperçu”, used as a noun in the sense of “insight”, as “apercu”.

Atocha Station in the title is a reference to the destination of the trains that were hit by the Madrid train bombings of 2004. At first the attack was attributed to ETA (Basque separatists, I believe), but actually it was al-Qaeda or some form of Islamist terrorism. Protests ensued over the perception that the bombing was being

exploited by the government for political purposes. Adam was not really a participant. He stumbles out of the Ritz way hungover from an alcohol-fueled, break up last stand with a girlfriend. He is swept here and there with friends but doesn't grasp what is going on in real time. Checks in to internet news sources to figure out what happened.

Adam exudes a persistent sense of his own fraudulence in the writing or research or whatever he was supposed to be doing in Madrid. Surprisingly, at end, he finds a sense of achievement and self-worth. Is he too self-critical? Others respect him, he finds. He speaks to some friends of staying on in Spain after the year is over, but admits to himself that he surely will go back to a normal American life after his fellowship ends.

In the course of his sporadic social interactions, he makes up a story that his mother has died or, alternatively, is very sick and that his father is a fascist, neither of which is remotely true. He is very ashamed of this, thinking of his dear parents back in Topeka. Is he looking for sympathy or maybe just making up something interesting to throw into the conversation? Two different women – Isabel and Teresa – figure in the narrative. Adam spends a lot of time with Teresa but never sleeps with her. He is surprised to find that she is someone fairly accomplished in the literary world and at the end appears on a panel with him. “I never thought to Google her,” he thinks. Isabel, with whom he has a more physical relationship, ditches him deftly by pretending to go off to Barcelona with “Oscar”. The spectacular goodbye dinner and night at the Ritz with Isabel is on Adam's parents' credit card. Adam and Isabel wake up to the bombings. Book flap asks: “Are his relationships with the people he meets in Spain as fraudulent as he fears his poems are?”

Adam takes a lot of pills: white pills (not clear what for), “anxiety” pills (seem to be something else), and also does “spliffs,” which I find is just marijuana. Lots of alcohol. He mentions that he never has injected anything.

The book flap calls this a portrait of the artist as a young man. I have presented my notes on it here because I believe it was just that and is key to a biographical sketch of Ben Lerner.

Leaving the Atocha Station was awarded the Believer Book Award in 2012, Margaret Atwood was the presenter that year. (I was impressed.) *The Believer* is a bi-monthly magazine of interviews, essays and reviews. It has been called a utopian literary magazine. Highbrow and yet bizarre. Part of “the generational

struggle against laziness and cynicism.” The Believer Book Award goes annually to a novel or story collection the editors deem to have been “the strongest and most underappreciated” of the year.

Tonight’s novel *10:04* was published in 2014. Excerpts from it were published in advance in *The Paris Review* and, for those excerpts, Lerner received the Terry Southern Fiction Prize, which is awarded annually to a writer published in that Review for “humor, wit, and sprezzatura.” I have to confess that I had to look up sprezzatura – I don’t feel bad; my spell check is not accepting it. Sprezzatura means a kind of studied carelessness: it originated from Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* where it is defined as “a certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort or almost without any thought about it.”

In the interest of getting on with whatever Leigh may see fit to do with that as an introduction to the critical paper, I will leave out a long list of Lerner’s awards and prizes that I have not mentioned and also not try and cover his intriguingly titled monograph called *The Hatred of Poetry*, but I can’t end without informing you that Ben Lerner is a certified “genius”, having received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2015. That fellowship carries a stipend of \$625,000, payable in quarterly installments over 5 years. So, he is still enjoying the financial freedom the MacArthur is intended to provide and I wish him well.

ALF