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# BOOK REVIEW

## Here I am, stuck in the middle

Novelist John Scalzi lives in Trump country; his online life is full of liberals. Can the worlds collide?

JOHN SCALZI  
CRITIC AT LARGE

As a writer of liberalish tendencies and one with an active — meaning, loud — political and social presence online, I am often accused (particularly on Twitter, the Wild West of social media) of being a “coastal elite.” Which is to say, one of those latte-drinking multiculturalists whoering in one of the big cities with an ocean nearby — but not the Gulf of Mexico, which totally does not count — who doesn’t know what it’s like for the honest, hard-working rural Americans in the “Down country,” a place someone like me would never visit.

Well, to those who accuse me thus, I invite you to visit my current hometown of Bradford, Ohio, population 1,850. It’s on the edge of Darke County, population 50,000, of which roughly 98% of its inhabitants are white. In the last presidential election, a full 78% of Darke County voters pulled the lever for Donald Trump.

This coastal elite lives in a place where there is so little light pollution he can see the Milky Way, where the nearest McDonald’s is 10 miles away, where a traffic jam is three cars behind an Amish buggy, and where the sound of repeated gunfire is not a cause for alarm but just the neighbors getting in some target practice.

So this is where I live, and you know what? It’s a nice place to live. It’s a place where your neighbors will play your driveway after a snowstorm, will look after your house when you’re away. They are kind and friendly people, who value family and community. I like living here.

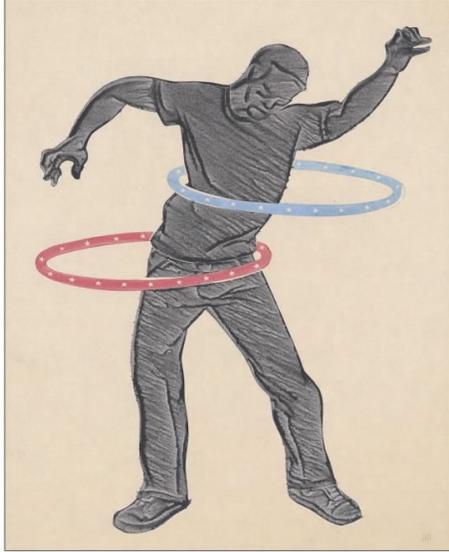
But, and this is important, it’s not the only place I live on a daily basis.

The other place I live is in my community of writers and creative people, which is, in fact, multicultural, multigendered and multiethnic and whose members I see every day online on Twitter and Facebook and monthly at conventions and other professional gatherings.

It’s not an exaggeration to say that thanks to travel, I see some of these creative people more often than I see some of the people in Bradford. With social media, I talk to writers and creators living in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington and elsewhere around the world on a more than daily basis.

This community is liberal, whereas my physical world community is conservative, almost none of my creative community voted for Trump (even the occasional nonvoter in this tribe voted for Gary Johnson or Evan McMullin). Like my real-world neighbors, these virtual neighbors are lovely people, whom I can bounce creative ideas off, celebrate achievements and commiserate career pitfalls with, count on for support and give support to. This community is my home, as much as the community of Bradford is my home.

My two communities are



ALEX NARBANE FOR THE TIMES

sharply defined to the point of near exclusion from each other — it’s fair to say that the only thing these two communities have in common is me and my family. But I rather strongly suspect that I am not the only person who finds himself in the small overlap of two (or more) entirely disparate communities.

I am not the only liberal I know who lives in a small rural town, and in my own circle of acquaintances, I know conservatives who dwell among throngs of liberals, nor is politics the only nexus of communities, even if it is the one I’m focused on now. It’s fair to say we’ve all found ourselves simultaneously living in separate worlds, sometimes contentedly and sometimes not.

Right now, both the places where I live are highly suspicious of each other. My creative community — with reason — sees Trump as a racist, a sexist and a white nationalist and his White House as harboring anti-Semites and those who see the Constitution of the United States as something to get around rather than revere. There’s

a strong belief in this community that those who voted for Trump either signed up for this bigotry directly or were willing to put up with it at the expense of so many other citizens and residents of this nation for the nebulous goal of “making America great again.”

On the flip side, a lot of people in Bradford and Darke County believe that what recovery happened in the U.S. over the last several years has left them behind and that their own lives have become more precarious as others have prospered. They believe a lot of that is down to the government — not just Barack Obama (who, to be clear, many believe shouldered a great deal of responsibility but all of the government in general).

Many of them believe that liberals helped create the problems that rural, white America faces and don’t care what happens to them, instead thinking of them as racist yobels who deserve what they get. Many of them take that personally and see Trump as a corrective.

No, I’m not going to tell you that each of these arguments has

objectively equal weight. I don’t think they do (I’m a liberal, guess which argument I think is more sound?). But I’m not going to say that either argument is entirely weightless, either. The liberals are right that Trump’s administration has both tacitly and explicitly condoned racism, sexism and bigotry and has played fast and loose with the Constitution, and none of that is news — Trump is merely fulfilling the promises of his campaign on this score.

No one who voted for the current president can say with a straight face that he or she didn’t know this was part of the package. It was, and they voted for it anyway. It’s all right to hold his voters accountable for it.

It’s also true that rural America was left behind in the Obama-era recovery — as were many other middle- and lower-income people, families and communities, rural and urban, as the lion’s share of the gains went to largely suburban and city-dwelling upper classes. It’s not accurate to say that Trump’s appeal was purely rooted in economic populism (there’s a

reason he and his crew leaned hard into bigotry and nationalism — because it worked). But it’s also not accurate to leave that out or to minimize it, either, and I see that happening. I think it’s wrong, or at the very least misleading, to focus on one entirely and not at least acknowledge there’s also validity in the other.

As someone who lives in two separate communities, I’m not so foolish as to believe that if the people in them just met each other, they would come to find a common ground, hug and then sing old-timey songs around a campfire. The property of community isn’t necessarily commutative. We’re not all going to just get along.

But if we’re not going to get along, maybe one small thing we can do to acknowledge where our communities have legitimate grievances. Conservatives, liberals are not wrong that the Trump administration is appalling, racist and unjust. Liberals, conservatives are not wrong to fear that rural (and yes, white) America is being left behind. Sympathy in both cases might be too much to ask for, but empathy might not be. And perhaps that’s what those of us who find ourselves in the overlap of two disparate communities can offer — not false-reasonable “moderate” fence-sitting but understanding of our communities and the ability to articulate that understanding to others. I’m not at all shy in my political opinions, and I’m sarcastic as hell, but I find it hard to caricature either rural conservatives or creative liberals, because I live with both, every day. I know the caricatures are incomplete.

I disagree politically with most of the people I live with in Bradford. I think that they’ve been sold a bill of goods in this last election and that they will suffer for it. But I can’t and don’t hate them (with, of course, personal reasons). Nor when the hammer fear is coming falls on me, will I be able just to say, “Well, that’s what you voted for, and turn away. They are my neighbors.”

Meanwhile, the hammer is already falling in my creative community, which is seeing racism and anti-Semitism and transphobia ramping up. I won’t turn away from it either — and along with the support I can offer directly, this community deserves me arguing for it and its value to people who might listen to me, who might not otherwise at all.

These are things I can do. I think they’re things anyone who live in two communities can try to do. Maybe none of us will bring them to those communities closer together.

But in a time where people have a hard time believing anyone could be a part of more than one community — more than one mind-set or way of thinking — maybe we can show that these communities are not as closed off as they seem.

Scalzi, a Times critic at large, is a Hugo Award-winning novelist. His latest book, “The Collapsing Empire,” is out March 21.

## Elif Batuman applies her gifts to fiction

By DUSTIN ILLINOWORTH

**The Idiot**  
Elif Batuman  
Penguin Press, 422 pp., \$27

With her smart and deliciously comic 2010 debut, the essay collection “The Possessed,” Elif Batuman wrote one of the 21st century’s great love letters to reading. Ostensibly orbiting an academic cottage industry devoted to the mighty Russians — Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, et al. — her true quarry proved to be the splendid gifts hidden within the creaking edifice of literature itself: a catalog of absurdities, yes, but also of uncanny and utterly contagious enthusiasms. It was a tour de force intellectual comedy exorcising an apology for literary obsession.

A different variety of possession is explored in “The Idiot,” Batuman’s first novel. Selin, the 18-year-old daughter of Turkish immigrants, is beginning her first year at Harvard. It’s 2003, and the connective tissue of technology is only just beginning to demonstrate its capacity for dread and magic. The newfangled platform email is especially troubling to our protagonist, creating a kind of Russian nesting doll of anxiety: “Each message contained the one that had come before,

and so your own words came back to you — all the words you threw out, they came back.”

Email is also the medium that propels Selin’s infatuation with Ivan, an older mathematics student on the same language class, they begin an elliptical, largely electronic correspondence. Selin agonizes over the attention she pays the increasingly intimate missives, even as she attempts to justify her obsession. “Why was it more honorable to read and interpret a novel like [Balzac’s] ‘Lost Illusions,’” she wonders, “than to read and interpret some email from Ivan?” A classic Batuman device: still, the first wootiness of campus romance registers as authentic. “I felt dizzy from the intimacy and remoteness,” Selin says. “Everything he said came from so thoroughly outside myself, I wouldn’t have been able to invent or guess any of it.”

For this reader, though, the book’s pleasures come not from the low-and-slow smolder of its central relationship, rather, it is Selin. Acutely self-conscious and fiercely intelligent, she renders a strange, mordantly funny and precisely observed world. Champaigne bottles “say on their bellies like black dogs with wire muzzles.” Suspended over a pond is “the quivering moken-pole of the sun.”



BROWNE BARNES

ELIF BATUMAN’S second book is the novel “The Idiot.”

It is difficult not to see Batuman in Selin, despite the well-documented dangers of ascribing an author’s characteristics to her characters. The New Yorker writer is also Turkish, and a Harvard alumna. Selin also shares her creator’s interest in the labyrinth of language. Its potential for both clarity and confusion. Selin enrolls in classes on linguistics and the philosophy of language. Batuman is wonderful here, stripping down abstruse theory to show how the structures of language often dictate the ways in

which we relate to one another. Of a particular verb tense in Turkish, she writes, “it was a curse, condemning you to the awareness that everything you said was potentially encroaching on someone else’s experience, that your own subjectivity was booby trapped and set you up to have conflicting stories with others.” (This could have been lifted from a Batuman essay.) It is a portrait of the young artist as she discovers the uncertainty of her tools: “There was no way to go through life, in Turkish or any other language, only making factual statements about direct observations. You were forced to use [that time], just by the human condition — just by existing in relation to other people.”

Language also frames the book’s second half, as Selin takes a summer job as an English tutor in a Hungarian village. While there are memorable scenes — a semi-grotesque child pugner Selin is asked to judge, a baneful canoe ride with Ivan — the pacing flags. I missed the spark and crackle of campus life. Selin’s surgical dissection of pulled-up professors, the ice-slashed street in Boston. Batuman worked on the novel off and on for more than a decade, and it shows here in a certain incoherence of affect. The Hungarian families tend to blend into a murky composite, and the denouement with

Ivan is not particularly satisfying.

Still, Selin’s is a consciousness one does not want to part with, by the end of the book, I felt as if I were in the presence of a strange, slightly detached, utterly brilliant friend. “I kept thinking about the uneven quality of time,” she writes, “the way it was almost always so empty, and then with no warning came a few days that felt so dense and alive and real that it seemed indisputable that that was what life was, that its real nature had finally been revealed.” Batuman articulates those little moments — of revelation and of emptiness — as well as anyone writing today. The book’s legacy seems destined to be one of obsession, its character — though when the observer is this gifted, is that really any wonder?

Illinoworth is a writer in Southern California.

**Elif Batuman with Steve Hely**

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