

MIAMI BOOK FAIR INT'L NOVEMBER 19, 2015

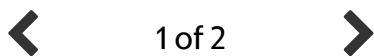
Jesse Eisenberg brings his funny side to the Miami Book Fair

HIGHLIGHTS

'Bream Gives Me Hiccups' is his first collection of short stories

The book's emphasis is on humor, but with a melancholy undertone

The stories are drawn from the actor's life but are not autobiographical



BY RENE RODRIGUEZ
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Jesse Eisenberg's jokes don't always land.

There was that time in July when the actor, walking the red carpet for a movie premiere, compared attending Comic-Con to genocide. Or that time earlier this week when the Internet exploded with outrage over a short story he wrote for the *New Yorker* that poked fun at film critics, depicting them as self-obsessed and vindictive.

The Oscar-nominated star of *The Social Network*, *Zombieland*, *The End of the Tour* and *Now You See Me* is used to mixed reviews. But the sort of anger his comedy stylings sometimes engender — the website Salon just published a fiery essay titled “Jesse Eisenberg is not funny” that reminded readers that he used the word “squaw” in another story for the *New Yorker* — is a more personal type of thumbs-down.

Still, the reviews for *Bream Gives Me Hiccups*, Eisenberg’s first collection of (mostly) humorous short stories, have been warm, including an unabashed rave from The Associated Press that was published on — ahem — Salon.

“I’ve said offensive things in my life, but I’ve usually only been around my friends, and they just tell me to shut up,” Eisenberg says via telephone from New York. “This book is a perfect way for me to have a real interaction with the public in a way that’s contextualized. It’s a book of humor, so even if it offends you, you understand the context, and hopefully I don’t have to apologize for it.”

Eisenberg, who will appear Sunday at the Miami Book Fair to read from his book (as well as unveil a new short piece about Miami), is an accomplished playwright, with three off-Broadway productions to his credit. His most recent play, *The Spoils*, premiered in June and co-starred *The Big Bang Theory*’s Kunal Nayyar, who will attend the fair alongside Eisenberg to read from his own collection of humorous essays.

But Eisenberg, 31, says the idea of a book simply hadn’t occurred to him, even though many of the stories in the collection were previously published elsewhere.

“I never even thought a book was a possibility, because the humorous short story is my favorite format to read,” he says. “It’s a good fit for someone like me, who has a short attention span in the age of cellphones. I’m not sure I would be able to go through with [writing] a novel. But I didn’t realize I could collect them into a book until I started reading my friend Simon Rich’s books. He’s written several collections [including *Ant Farm: And Other Desperate Situations* and *The Last Girlfriend on Earth*]. Then I found George

Saunders and Miranda July and other people who wrote collections that weren't necessarily humor-based. So I realized I could put in stuff that was a little darker or a little sadder. It could all fit into a book, tied together simply by being stuff I like."

Bream Gives Me Hiccups takes its title from the book's first section, "Restaurant Reviews from a Privileged Nine-Year-Old," which are exactly what they sound like. The stories are short and funny, and they shrewdly capture the thought processes of a smart little boy who lives with his divorced mother and considers every move she makes.

"Last night, Mom took me to a new restaurant called Masgouf ... Mom said that all the women in her book club already went to the restaurant, but I didn't know why that meant we had to go to the restaurant too. And I don't know why Mom is even in the book club, because she doesn't read any of the books and, on the nights before the book club meetings at our house, she says [expletive] a lot and asks me to look on Wikipedia."

These stories were originally published individually by McSweeney's Internet Tendency over a two-year period online. But when read together, they present a psychologically complex and bittersweet portrait of a child of divorce who is aware he is being used as a tool of war against his father.

Eisenberg, the rare kind of writer who likes being asked, "Where do you get your ideas?" ("That's a great question!" he says) explains that this batch of stories sprang out of a simple observation he made while dining at a posh Japanese restaurant with his girlfriend to celebrate their anniversary.

"Sitting at the next table was this 9-year-old asking his mother, 'Mommy, do I like tamago?' It was funny to see a little boy in this fancy restaurant. I thought it would be funny to write restaurant reviews from his perspective. And then as I started writing I realized it would be more interesting to write about a kid who is a product of divorce and is only going to these restaurants because the father has agreed to pay for anything the mother does with the boy.

"The stories took on this kind of sad tone. Then I realized this kid would be more aware of the hypocrisies of the adult world, because he's not encumbered with the white lies adults tell to get through the day. He's not burdened by all the nonsense surrounding human interaction. So he would have a greater insight into the truth. He would see the mom's desperation. So the reader gets to see the world through a 9-year-old's eyes, but it's more insightful than if the adults were telling the story."

While he was writing this particular batch of stories, Eisenberg says, he was also shooting *The Double*, the surreal 2013 thriller about a sad-sack office worker who discovers he has a doppelganger with all the charisma and confidence he lacks.

“I was playing two roles: One of them was an emotionally stunted man who is so sincere and honest and thinks like a baby, and the other one was this brash and insensitive guy. I already had those two mindsets going, so I was able to think in terms of a young child and a cold, older person. For me, acting and writing are overlapping creative processes. When I’m writing plays, I’m performing them in my mind. I’m playing Lex Luthor [in next year’s *Batman v Superman*], and I have to find a way to sympathize with that character, even though he’s doing horrible things. By doing that, you challenge yourself to understand the darkness of the human experience. Even though the movie is a superhero movie — just like some of my writing is comedic — it’s still about finding the emotional reality of another person.”

The longest section in *Bream Gives Me Hiccups* is titled “My Roommate Stole My Ramen.” It is comprised of letters written by a frustrated college freshman to her former high school guidance counselor in which she complains about everything from her insensitive roomie to her teachers, complete with elaborate footnotes. Eisenberg says he drew on his experience with the oldest of his two sisters to create the character, one of the myriad ways in which the collection is autobiographical without really being autobiographical (he was born in Queens and raised in suburban New Jersey by Jewish parents).

“My older sister was always a very sweet and contemplative person, and then she went away to college,” he says. “One day she called me, furious about something really petty, and I told her she was being petty, and we laughed about it. One of the things that struck me is that at the beginning of the self-actualization process, young people are coming to terms with a lot of simple situations that make them angry. There’s something funny about that anger, because often the situations are insignificant, like your roommate eating your Ramen. But for you, at that moment, it’s a big deal.

“So I started writing about this girl who at first comes across really angry but as you learn more about her life, you realize she’s sad and lonely, and she’s struggling to find herself. It’s hard for me to write a character over the course of a long story who is not struggling with something. If she was just a funny angry girl, I could only write about that for a page or two. But here, I thought it was funny, because you’re invested in her emotionally, and sad too, because you’re laughing at her pain.”

The bulk of *Bream Gives Me Hiccups* consists of smaller, high-concept pieces, many of which seem designed to be read aloud. *Marv Albert Is My Therapist* imagines what a session would be like if the shouty sportscaster was your shrink. *Alexander Graham Bell's First Five Phone Calls* ingeniously builds on that premise over a quick four pages, suggesting the template for all forms of future telephone conversations was set down in 1876. *If I Was Fluent In...* is written in script form and explores cultural stereotypes and xenophobia with humor.

And *Men and Dancing* (reprinted from the New Yorker, with “Native American woman” in place of “squaw”) is comprised of four vignettes regarding the innate male fear of being forced to dance, including a wide receiver dismayed at learning he is required to do a celebratory dance in the end zone after a touchdown. Like most of *Bream Gives Me Hiccups*, the entry is fast, hilarious, ready to be performed and pared down to its leanest version possible.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’m cutting too much,” Eisenberg says about his ruthless self-editing. “I always end up cutting a lot down. But what’s great about this format is that there’s a number of words that work really well — somewhere under one thousand. Once you get past that, the stories start to sputter a little bit. There’s an absurdity to these premises, and once the premise wears out its welcome, you lose mileage. When I do find a premise that can last longer, like the girl who’s struggling to adapt to college, I can go on about that. But usually these work better in short form. That’s what I love to read, and there’s a real art to doing that.”

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MEET THE AUTHOR

Who: Jesse Eisenberg with Kunal Nayyar

When: 12:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: Chapman Conference Center, Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus. Free but tickets required; there will be a standby line; www.miamibookfair.com



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