

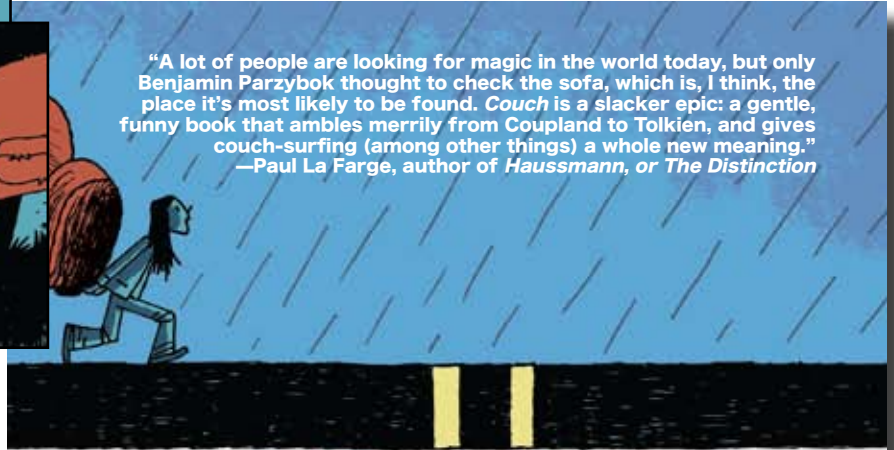
Couch
a novel
by
Benjamin
Parzybok

A Reader's Guide and
Companion

"A lot of people are looking for magic in the world today, but only Benjamin Parzybok thought to check the sofa, which is, I think, the place it's most likely to be found. *Couch* is a slacker epic: a gentle, funny book that ambles merrily from Coupland to Tolkien, and gives couch-surfing (among other things) a whole new meaning."
—Paul La Farge, author of *Hausmann*, or *The Distinction*

COUCH

benjamin parzybok



COUCH



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Benjamin Parzybok created a journal published through gumball machines (*Gumball Poetry*) and a city-wide mystery/treasure hunt (Black Magic Insurance Agency). His previous jobs include: ghostwriter for the Governor of Washington state, web developer, Taiwanese factory technical writer, asbestos removal janitor, potato sorter, and congressional page. He lives in Portland, Oregon, with the writer Laura Moulton and their two children.



Three guys try to carry a couch across the country.

Three guys on an important mission involving furniture.

It's just a couch. Right?

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From above, from a thousand feet up, an eagle’s-eye view, it’s a strange spectacle still. A six-legged insect, stiff and ungainly, too long on the grape vine gone to vinegar.

From five hundred feet one sees a mutant, an insect with three heads, each imbued with its own purpose. Each with a desire to carry its midsection somewhere else. First moving one way, and then the next, drifting here and there like three hands on a Ouija board.

From one hundred feet up, the height of a mere eight-story building, it becomes obvious that each pair of insect legs is joined at a human torso, with human heads, and between them, the three, they share a burden. A piece of furniture, seemingly.

From ten feet, a guardian angel’s view, the view this tale will take, three men carry a couch. An orange, knit couch of considerable size.

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An interview with Benjamin Parzybok

Couch is Portland, Oregon, author Benjamin Parzybok's first novel—and besides being a thoughtful exploration of the choices we make every day it is a great, fun, quest where three everyday (well, maybe they're a little odd) guys have to get rid of their couch after their apartment is flooded.

How hard can it be?

So the first thing we thought we'd do for this guide is to ask Ben a few questions about *Couch*, writing, travel, and more:

*Q. The first question people asked at a recent reading was whether **Couch** is based on a true story. So, is it?*

Parzybok: Some years ago my wife and I bought a couch at a second hand store about 14 blocks from our house. We were too cheap to rent a truck and did not own a car. It was a heavy thing—but 14 blocks seemed do-able, even though we would be walking through a fairly upscale neighborhood with lots of shops and foot traffic. We could only make it about 3/4 of a block at a time, then we'd rest, usually by sitting on the couch. We joked to passersby that we were carrying it cross-country, of course. What was most interesting was how it changed people's perception of us and opened them to conversation. They stopped to talk to us and laughed when we sat on the couch. Cars slowed down and people leaned out their windows to chat. Suddenly we were accessible and integrated, where before we'd felt like newcomers (we'd just moved to Portland from Taiwan) in a too-hip neighborhood. I really liked this idea that doing something so simple as carrying something could completely alter your place in society. This seemed like a great way to convince my characters to carry the couch (at the beginning). They were outcasts and having this instant popularity on the street would be startling and interesting and appealing to them. But to answer the question, yes: I carried a couch to S. America.



Q. How do you fit writing into your life?

Parzybok: I've written three novel-length pieces and all of them have been in places foreign to me. I wrote my first book in a Brooklyn brownstone, the second while working in as a tech writer in a Taiwanese factory, and my third, *Couch*, in Ecuador. I'm not sure this is exactly 'fitting writing into my life'—rather, excluding my life for a set period of time to binge on a novel. I averaged 1,500 a day while working on *Couch* and I wrote the ending in a single 8,000 word marathon of a day (most of which I tossed during a later revision). After I woke up and made coffee I'd go back and write in bed (we were short on desk space in Ecuador) until hunger got the better of me, usually around 2-3pm. I have two kids now and so things are different—you have to fit writing into the cracks. Mostly this has taken the form of short stories done late at night. However I'm beginning work on another long piece, so cross your fingers for me. I'll probably be living in Turkmenistan by the end of it.

Q. Do you think traveling out of the USA is important for writers living there?

Parzybok: It's vital for me—it takes me completely outside of myself and allows a heightened sense of awareness, both emotional and sensory. Also—if you're writing about your own culture, it allows you to see it in a way you wouldn't be able to stuck in the thick of it. And while I think there's an environmental cost to traveling abroad—in general I think going to other countries, particularly 'third world' countries, makes you a better person; more aware of the finite nature of the planet and of the positive and negative aspects of our culture. But I think the biggest factor for me is to feel unsafe, to feel challenged, to be bumped from routine.

Q. What advice would you give other authors?

Parzybok: Be dogged. Edit mercilessly. Do your own thing. Write what you'd most love to read (not necessarily what you know). And be dogged.

Q. How many steps did you take today and why are you interested in that number?

I'm at 8,739 steps so far today, which is not too shabby. I love metrics and stats—and I like to be able to quantify bits of my life. Like keeping word counts I find that keeping track of my steps (via a pedometer) encourages my attention to the activity. I believe that anything measured and observed improves. One of my more recent web projects is Walker Tracker—a step tracker for pedometer wearers. It's a social application with a small, dedicated group focussed around walking—for health, for meditation, for lots of reasons.

*Q. How did you come to write *Couch*?*

I started out to write the story of three outcasts disheartened by the state of the world

and so they set out to do something about it, and how their relationships with each other and the world change via the voyage they undertake. I'd imagined them performing a sort of symbolic reverse Westward Expansion, with the intent to carry civilization, or at least in their minds one of the most rotten symbols of it—a couch—back to its source in the Middle East. To start the whole affair of human society from square one again. It was to be a Cormac McCarthy-style difficult-adventure, but with some absurdism and humor and I didn't think they'd make it to Idaho, even. However during the writing of the book I moved to South America and the magic of where I was—where you could

tread on the remains of a 500-year-old civilization in city centers, and those civilizations were often built on the backs of 2500-year-old-civilizations, and so on—affected the book. I began to understand there were great mysterious gaps in the understanding of our history as a species, and yet simultaneously we were destroying cultures

and erasing more history at an alarming rate through cultural imperialism and free trade and globalization. During this time I reread *Lord of the Rings*, which has its own cultural imperialism thread, and some of the voyage of the ring worked its way into the voyage of the couch. The couch took on some of the characteristics of the ring, as well, though in a 'couch potato-y' way: it lulls those who sit on it to sleep, it's willful about the direction it wishes to go, it causes mishap. While on the surface *Couch* is an adventure novel, a quest, I also wanted to fashion a character in it that had a deeply personal transformative experience. Thom starts as a political and smart character who is depressed, inept, lonely and with a very low sense of self-worth—in a final scene he begins to fancy himself the savior of the world. And he just might be.



Questions to get the discussion going

Thom sometimes has dialogues with a voice in his head that he calls “Brain.” What is the significance of the fact that this Brain has a distinct personality, name, and perspective? How does Thom’s relationship to Brain change over the course of the book?

When Thom, Tree, and Eric begin carrying their couch through the streets of Portland, they’re mistaken for performance artists. What effect does this have on them individually and as a group? How about when Jean believes they’re engaged in some kind of political demonstration?

Each of the three members of the group have their own role to play in moving the couch. What contributions to the journey are each of them able to make? What are their strengths and weaknesses, and how do they affect the trip?

Where is the best place to take an old couch?

There are two opposing forces attempting to gain control over the couch: the secret council that Shin belongs to and “the collectors.” What interests do each of these organizations represent? What would happen if the couch were to fall into the hands of either group?

Many people in the novel come up with ideas about what the couch is and why it possesses such strange powers. If the couch is simply a metaphor, what does it represent?

How can something so ordinary and ubiquitous take on such meaning?

What will be different for each of the main characters after the story of *Couch* is over? Will the world be changed at all by their actions?

Is it always about the journey or is it ever about the destination?

Couch is a novel that begins with a fairly straightforward premise—three friends have to move the couch out of their apartment—but it gets stranger as it goes, and ordinary objects take on new significance. Are there objects in your life that seem to have power of some kind? Have you ever had a strange experience that resulted from some ordinary action?

After reading *Couch*, have your feelings towards your own couch changed? Do you have a couch? (Or two?) (Three?)



Couch competition photo: Will Ludwigensen

Benjamin Parzybok's "Book Notes" from David Gutowski's site *Largehearted Boy*

In the Book Notes series, authors create and discuss a music playlist that is in some way relevant to their recently published books.

Composing and listening to music go hand in hand for me, and I'm deeply indebted to some of these musicians for influencing and inspiring my work. I interpreted creating a soundtrack roughly—some of this would go in the movie, were the book made into one, others I wedged into the soundtrack because I couldn't imagine leaving them out.

Thom is a computer geek whose hacking of a certain Washington-based software giant has won him a little fame but few job prospects. Erik is a smalltime con man, a fast-talker who is never quite quick enough on his feet. Their roommate, Tree, is a confused clairvoyant whose dreams and prophecies may not be completely off base. After a freak accident floods their apartment, the three are evicted—but they have to take their couch with them. The real problem? The couch—huge and orange—won't let them put it down. Soon the three roommates are on a cross-country trek along back roads, byways,

and rail lines, heading far out of Portland and deep into one very weird corner of the American dream, with a willful couch in tow.

Do Make Say Think, "Highway 420" from the album *Winter Hymn Country Hymn Secret Hymn*: "Highway 420" is a perfect fit for Highway 30, which the roommates travel down, carrying the couch behind them. It's hard, slow, meditative work, a time for introspection on self and one's destiny. Do Make Say Think make fantastic music to write to. Though they have no lyrics, in listening to their music, you have a sense there's a lot of intelligence there.

Datarock, "Computer Camp Love": I think the book is, and I hope readers will agree, very funny—and the hilarious "Computer Camp Love" is perfectly crafted for Thom's childhood. I can imagine Thom living this Commodore 64 geek romance in 1984.

Ben Allison, "Third Rail": I love jazz bassist Ben Allison and his track "Third Rail" says train adventure like nothing else. It's perfect for Theo's handmade, open-air rail cart that carries himself, a giant man named Randall, an opinionated dog, Thom, Tree, Erik and an unruly couch through various outer suburbs toward the Pacific ocean.

The Crooked Jades, "Goodbye Trouble The Soul of Man": The couch—their cross, their trouble—is taken from them, and they are deeply sad. We all love our troubles, do we not?

Deltron 3030, "Positive Contact": Can I just say: Sci Fi Rap—Hell yeah! Let's have more bands like this. "Positive Contact" is a great song and though this song is about a super-space-wars-rebel-fighting-DJ, it's appropriate for Thom—who illicitly networks together thousands of computers inside of Microsoft in an attempt to answer the question "if there were a 100 monkeys, a 100 typewriters and infinite time would they write all of literature's



great works?” The lyrics start “Now let’s see—Deltron Z, Art avenger.” If Thom were to stop and think about it, he might envision himself an art avenger—but he’s got no ego involved in the act, more a profound curiosity combined with some mad skillz.

Modest Mouse, “Heart Cooks Brain”: Thom’s Brain is a character in the book, here’s the part where brain is introduced:

Brain was the entity of indeterminable size that sat somewhere above Thom’s right eye, one inch in. The origin of headaches. That Muppet cynic gallery that studied his every move from some disappointed forefather’s eyes. Part logician and part patriarch, brain intruded on Thom’s consciousness primarily as a backseat driver.

Through much of the story there’s a battle waging between Thom’s heart and his brain. I think the song’s title fits this war’s resolution.

Built to Spill, “In Your Mind”: On that theme, Built to Spill’s totally brilliant song from *Ancient Melodies of the Future*, which manages to talk about the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, the fractal organization of nature, the narrator’s paranoia, aging and personal relationships—all in under 4 minutes. This song is definitely on Thom’s brain’s team.

Kid Koala, “Skanky Panky”: This somewhat dark, funny, ominous, drunk-inducing song by turntablist Kid Koala is a great representation of the character of the couch itself. No one is sure what it is, only that there’s something deeply disturbing about it.

Smog, “Held”: What a truly great song from a great musician. Thom surrenders to love! And Jean loves him back! Hooray! Then: Back to the business of carrying couches.

The Breeders’ version of “Happiness is a Warm Gun”: For a while, Thom seriously deludes himself into believing he’s a super hero—until he very much discovers he is not: “I need a fix, ’cause I’m going down.” For a while, he had a gun, and he was happy, if a bit flustered.

Andrew Bird, “Scythian Empires”: The Scythians were a ~500B.C. nomadic people known for their archers. Enough said? No? OK. *Couch* spirals deeply into ancient civilizations in the last third of the book as they go looking for a lost city. The book addresses the loss of knowledge (genetic, cultural or learned) through the history of humanity and the death of culture. This is a sad song about an empire mostly forgotten.

Veda Hille, “Instructions” & “Seasoned”: There are some musicians you owe a debt to, and some you wished were vastly more popular. Veda Hille fits both here. I composed this book in Ecuador in 2002 with very limited access to music other than what was on my laptop. Veda Hille’s album *Spine* was there and it pushed me through a lot of productive days. The music and the intelligence of the lyrics made me write better. From “Instructions,” a song that is simply a list of instructions to the listener, there are a couple of incredible lines that very aptly fit scenes for Thom:

16) “when blinded, construct images around unknown sounds, assume you’re correct.”



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When Thom is lying near-death and unseeing on a couch in a remote village he does just that and:

11) “Learn to recognize the beauty of your own back,” which would be an excellent start for his own self-confidence. Another favorite line comes from “Seasoned,” “My heart is busted from enthusiastic over-use.” Thanks, Veda!

Shirim Klezmer Orchestra, “Yiddish Blue,” “Galitsianer Tantz”: If, hypothetically speaking, three furniture movers, a band of Colombian guerrillas and the residents of an entire village completely isolated from the outside world were to converge in a dark hut with copious amounts of Andean moonshine, these songs would most definitely be on the DJ’s playlist.

TV on the Radio, “Dreams”: The chorus is “All your dreams are over now”—which is, quite literally, what happens to Tree. Tree dreams the future and at one point the

dreams simply end. The rest of the song has less to do with Tree, but it’s a great song nevertheless.

The Microphones, “The Pull”: A great, atmospheric, melancholic song for when the roommates are lost in the fog deep in the Andes, carrying a couch, one of them dying. And yet, they, too, feel the pull. “From high above you, I saw your earth framed body wrapped in wool. The glow surrounds you. and when you breathed in . . . I felt the pull.” Wow.

Beck. “Go It Alone”: I like to think of Thom at the end, when all hope is more or less lost, listening to this song in his head to drown out the sound of his own brain and realizing that if he’s going to get the shit done, it’s going to have to be him, and him alone.

www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2008/10/book_notes_ben_2.html



C O U C H

In Benjamin Parzybok's debut novel a freak flood evicts three unlikely roommates from their apartment, forcing them to get up off the couch . . . and start carrying it. Paul La Farge calls it: "A slacker epic: a gentle, funny book that ambles merrily from Coupland to Tolkien, and gives couch-surfing (among other things) a whole new meaning."

Dear Readers,

Precisely seven years ago today my partner and I moved into an apartment in Cuenca, Ecuador where we planned to spend six months writing books. Hers was about a lost journalist, mine was about—at least from what I could gather from the scraps of paper I had lying about—three guys carrying a couch.

What we didn't know was that *Carnaval* started several months early in Cuenca and they have the unique tradition of dowsing every last living, breathing creature with water balloons, water cannons, buckets of water, water launchers and fire hoses from the start of January until the end of *Carnaval*. If you dared venture outside you quickly got used to constant bombardment and sodden clothes; it was a productive writing time for us. In our first few days of exploits we were lucky: we watched children fighting water gun battles in the streets, saw water balloons lobbed across balconies, saw drive-by water cannon fights—but whether it was the luck of the newly-arrived or because the season was just warming up, only tentative shots were taken at us.

My first real understanding of the depth of the conflict came when I blithely walked by an old tailor's shop and an entire bucket of water was thrown over me. I stood frozen in the street—my shoulders hunched futilely in defense, my grocery bags leaking

water and my shoes filling up. I heard a long, gleeful cackle. I stepped back to get a look at my attacker and saw a wizened octogenarian seamstress with a toothless, mischievous grin holding an empty bucket. She scrambled for her water gun—which was several feet long, incidentally—to preemptively fend off retaliation, and then it seemed as though half a dozen windows opened above me. Buckets of water were eased out onto the sills. That's when I ran. The next seven weeks were spent in all-out water warfare.

I took to carrying two tiny palm-sized squirters nestled in my fists whenever I went out. In one particularly epic battle we were retreating from bank security guards who lobbed water balloons from the inner sanctum of Banco Central de Ecuador when an armored truck passed and peppered us from behind with supersoakers protruding from the gun ports.

My characters in *Couch* are in Ecuador and I asked them to write you a postcard. They did—though they seem to have gotten the directions a little confused. You'll have to forgive them, I understand they're under some duress, carrying a couch cross-continently.

Cheers,
Benjamin Parzybok

January 3, 2009

Hello readers—should I call you readers?—right now I'm sitting in a small, dusty cafe off the playa looking out over the busy stretch of tables where people are industriously enjoying their meals. On the coast of Ecuador there's a ceviche dish—fish cooked by lime juice (no heat required!)—served with popcorn and yucca on top—so delicious. Erik has gone to the bathroom—some time ago, and at this point were I to be honest with myself, we ought to begin worrying about him, but I'm going to choose to ignore the situation for as long as I'm comfortably able. Tree is in a semi-stupor across from me, his neck riddled with insect bites. He's tapping a pencil tip slowly on the table, in dreamy rhythm to his somnolence. We've stood the couch up on its end beside our table. It is causing some concern but I'm pretending it's not connected to us. Don't worry, though—we know our job, and we're doing it for you. I hope you're well, write when you can! —Thom

Hi Ben,
Thanks for the beer and for not killing me, etc. Dude! What's with the mosquitoes? So annoying! Also I think I heard the couch talking in my mind last night while I slept. Seriously. Anyway. Having a nice time man, *abrazos!*
Erik

Dear sirs, I was wondering if you had any idea where I might find a map of the Pacific Basin. I had a dream where roadways led up out of the water like fingers. They pointed the direction we needed to go. Old trade routes from sunken cities to the mountain peaks, like meridians. Also, could you tell Shin to get in touch because I think we're being followed. OK Thanks Tree.

Benjamin Parzybok's "The Big Idea" from John Scalzi's site *Whatever*

In The Big Idea series, authors discuss the, you've got it, big idea behind their new books. Ben wrote this piece after his interview above, so this can be seen as a fuller expansion (the 12" remix?) of those answers.

Couch is not the book I thought I was going to write.

I thought I was writing the story of three outcasts disheartened by the state of the world who come up with the hair-brained notion that civilization has failed. They decide the remedy is to carry civilization back to where it started. Obviously this is impractical the bridges, the buildings—and so they take up their large, natty, orange couch as a stand-in and begin to carry it to the Middle East.

It was to be a sort of nerdy reverse Westward Expansion, a Quixotic journey of three guys shedding passivity, with a dash of Donner party and Tolkien thrown in.

However, during the writing of the book I moved to South America. The magic of the place was deeply infectious. Walk from your apartment to the grocery store and you've tread over a bedrock of forgotten civilizations. The town in which I lived was built on top of an Incan town, the Incans built over the top of the Cañaris, the Cañaris conquered and built over those that had been there before. Who knew how many mysterious layers lay below that?

All of this was lost knowledge. Which of these civilizations had a cure for cancer? Which had surmised the essential building blocks of the universe or spoken in a language that allowed access to an entirely different part of the brain? Have a quick look at the following list of languages:

Aikaná, Andoque, Betoí, Camsá, Canichana, Cayubaba, Cofán, Culle, Gamela, Huamoé, Irantxe, Itonama, Jotí, Karirí, Kawésqar, Kukurá, Mapudungun, Movima, Munichí, Nambiquaran, Natú, Omurano, Otí, Pankararú, Pirahã, Puquina, Sabela, Taushiro, Tequiraca, Ticuna, Tuxá, Warao, Xokó, Xukurú, Yámana, Yuracaré, Yuri, Yurumanguí.

These are all South American languages.



es—most of them extinct—with no connection to any other language (called Language Isolates). They are entirely unique. Imagine making your own language completely from scratch. What did they talk about when the field was plowed? But we know we've lost a lot of knowledge, we're shedding it like bad fashion. We're homogenizing the planet's genetic library as fast as we're able, it seems, we're sucking the air out of cultures with television and pop culture, and we've had huge losses of knowledge throughout history. One could ask: Had the Library of Alexandria—at one time the greatest repository of knowledge the world had ever seen—not been destroyed some 2000 years ago, would we already be living in a science fiction universe with space elevators and disposable bodies?

My research and my characters diverged, and for an uncomfortable week I watched them watching me from up there, in Portland, Oregon, stranded by this new information, until I gave the author's dog whistle and signaled that, yes, they could come down to South America, if they liked.

What none of us had realized all this time was that the couch they carried was a particularly strange one. It was a willful thing—impossibly heavy unless you carried it in the direction that, presumably, it wanted to go. It caused those who sat on it to fall into a comatose sleep. It floated. So off they set with this naughty couch, slowly understanding that they had something special and dangerous, a relic from another time. Something, perhaps, from a culture that'd gone on developing and evolving untouched by outside influence, lost deep in the Andes, like a parallel universe. And the couch itself contained within it something so powerful and compelling that it had been pursued throughout history.

This was unfamiliar territory for me. I was down in Ecuador and slowly writing my characters toward me in their journey, and growing increasingly aware that I was writing a book that had started in reality which was moving to some sort of extra-reality. I had fancied myself a fellow who enjoys, but generally skirts around the idea of magic in a book. It was during this time that myself

and a few friends took a trek deep into the Andes accompanied by a mule to a place the locals warned we'd be killed, a moonshining, smuggler's village accessible only by a two day journey on foot. There were no roads, no electricity, no cultural invasion, and that separation from 'civilization' seemed to enable a special kind of reality there. It was a truly idyllic place, where fish were kept in water holes in your front yard, where weather seemed to crash in in every incarnation, all at once (the village elevation was 12,000 feet), where you kept hundred gallon barrels of moonshine in your bedroom and started off the day siphoning a plug or two. There was a healer. There was a deaf girl who'd invented her own signs to communicate with others in the village. There were sheep in the hills and the men spoke to their horses. Legend and history were inseparable.

It was here that I arrived at another 'big idea'—that myth is a word modern society makes up because the reality seems incomprehensible within a western-minded framework of civilization. Modern society essentially negates the possibility of the real story. Through this new lens I began to question all of history and mythology, trying to sort out the what ifs if certain parts were inverted.

It was through all of this that my characters walked, Thom, Tree and Erik. My main character, Thom, is a sensible, reasonable person. A computer programmer who believes in logic, and he chronicles his struggle with this transition from the realistic to the fantastical as they wind their way ever deeper into the mysteries of the couch. Tree is the opposite, a specimen from some other world thrust into a body and time he doesn't ever quite seem to understand, so dominated by his own dreams they overlap into waking. And Erik, a failed con-man and an impulsive, accident-prone mouth-piece for their journey, has, unbeknownst to him, deep ties to where they're going.

<http://whatever.scalzi.com/2008/11/06/the-big-idea-benjamin-parzybok/>



An excerpt from Benjamin Parzybok's novel *Couch*

I. The Couch

The disaster came late on Sunday night. Erik was asleep on the couch and Thom and Tree were in their rooms, but the apartment above thumped with activity. An inebriated romantic encounter between a gymnast and a horse jockey had gotten a bit too creative. A table next to a waterbed was upturned. A lit candle from the table rolled next to the bed, catching a small pile of newspapers, dirty laundry, and a book of matches on fire. The fire licked at the underside of the waterbed, burning a hole that drowned the small fire. Fate lent a push, however, and several powerful pneumatic jostlings by the pair atop the waterbed opened the hole wider and pushed the water out with great throbbing force until the couple noticed they were sinking. By the time they had their wits about them, half the bed had leaked onto the floor. They ran for towels—which were useless against the massive flood of water—then gathered a meager collection of pots and pans that could not hold the gallons still flowing from the bed in biblical proportions.

Erik woke startled and flailing from a dream in which a horse had been pissing on him. He leapt from the couch and flipped on the light switch to see their apartment turned into a waterfall. Frantic pounding footsteps sounded from the apartment above. Water bowed the sheetrock in the center of the ceiling and had broken through the plaster. The green shag rug had taken on the appearance of a swamp.

“Tree! Thom! Ho-lee shit!”

He ran down the hallway, pounded his fists on his roommates' doors and yelled, “Wake the hell up, goddamnit!” He gathered all the towels out of the bathroom. In the living room, he let the towels drop as he realized he didn't have the faintest idea what he was going to do with them. Thom appeared in the hallway, his eyes wide as searchlights, and Tree appeared a moment later.

“What, what did you do?” Thom said, staring over Erik's shoulder at the wreckage of the living room.

“I didn't do anything!”

“Wow,” Tree said, “this is really . . . really.” He tapped his

temple with his forefinger repeatedly.

A rapid, angry banging came from the door. Erik sloshed across to open it and found that the swollen rug had sealed the door shut. He put his foot against the wall, his hands firmly around the doorknob, and pulled with all his might. His hands slipped and he landed on his back in the swamp water. He got up and managed to yank the door open a crack, letting water into the hallway. A very stout, enraged woman shook her fists and yelled at him to *Turn his goddamn water off, he was sinking them back to the fucking Stone Age!*

“It's upstairs, upstairs!” he said breathlessly and pointed at the ruined ceiling. She pounded off, presumably toward the upstairs.

“Power cords!” Thom yelled.

Tree jumped in the air like a stung fish, curving and turning, and landed on his back on the edge of the television, hurling it to the floor and pulling its power cord from out of the socket, stopping the electricity from surging through the water.

“Holy shit!” Erik waded toward Tree to help him up.

“I'm looking for more power cords,” Thom yelled and rushed around the apartment, a great spray of water leaping up from each footfall. He unplugged two more and saw that the downpour was beginning to slow.

Tree was laid out on his back on the couch, slow drips landing on his knees, lip, and sternum. Erik was angrily sloshing around.

“How you doing, Tree?” asked Thom.

“Nothing is broken, I think. I don't feel great though.”

“You'll be sore. That was a hellish fall. But shit, you saved us, I bet.”

“Not the TV though,” Tree said. The three looked at the TV, upside down in a corner, surrounded by water, like a shipwreck stuck in the surf.

“Probably not,” Thom said. “Doesn't look good for the TV. Or the apartment.”

“What in the fuck?” Thom raised palms toward the upstairs, or the sky. Or God.

“Waterbed upstairs,” Erik said. “Some kind of fire underneath it. That lady came back. She's so mad.” Erik smiled. “I mean, she's mad. The whole waterbed let loose. I'm mad too, I guess. All the water in here is soaking the apartment below us, the poor suckers.”

“This is really screwed,” Thom said. “Let's get out of here. I'm treating everyone to breakfast. Does your car still work, Erik?”

“If it doesn't, at least it's dry.”

Outside, rain was streaming from a black sky. “Celestial waterbed,” Thom joked and was ignored. The three piled into Erik's car and headed for an all-night diner across town, black smoke curling up behind them, an ocean of

rain in front. Every once in a while Erik would bang on the steering wheel and curse.

The restaurant was full of the regular assembly of stylish, alternative Portland nightlife—people none of them felt at home with. Velvet Elvises mixed with local artists and black lights on the walls.

Erik ordered two pieces of pie, Tree a grilled-cheese sandwich, and Thom complicated things with eggs without cheese, no toast, and Italian sausage that he felt guilty ordering in front of the vegetarian-looking waitress. Beers were had all around.

“So, dreamboy, what are you going to do now?” Erik said. “Dream this one too?”

“I did have . . . I’ve had a lot of dreams with water lately. Sort of thought it was one of those.”

“Oh, you did, did you? Next time let’s have a little more warning. I woke up from dreaming that I was getting pissed on by a horse.”

Thom chuckled and noticed the bar was playing his ex-girlfriend’s favorite band, Neutral Milk Hotel. *Oh comely, I will be with you when you lose your breath.* A tingle went up his spine.

Erik lurched up and over to a group on their last drinks of the night. He came back with a lit cigarette.

“Yep,” he said, “yep yep yep.” Exhaling smoke. “It was pretty funny though. You’ve all got to admit that it was pretty funny. Tree’s swan dive. The whole thing like a Sea-World exhibition.”

“Yeah,” said Thom, “it’d be funnier if I wasn’t so entirely screwed. Maybe I’ll go live with my mom.”

“Hey, at least you can,” Erik said. “My folks are probably lost in a jungle somewhere. Home-home has been gone for decades.”

“Yeah,” Tree said.

“Yeah what?” said Erik, covering Tree in smoke, waving it away.

“Mine too. Not a . . . err, not a jungle, but same sort of thing.”

Erik exhaled another cloud of smoke in a sine wave, nodding vigorously. “We could always get arrested.” His white teeth picked up the glow of a black light somewhere. “It’s better than the rain.”

“I think we . . .” Tree started and then looked down at the table, fingered the saltshaker. He grabbed the pepper and made the two spices do a self-conscious jig.

Erik and Thom exchanged looks.

“Not more of that dream shit. That’s freaky shit,” Erik said.

“It’s not so freaky,” Thom said. “The mind is an interesting entity. The dreams may be subconscious wishes, snatches of extrapolated information that seem like premonition. Jung even talked about tapping into a collec-

tive mind—so he may have lifted the fifty-eight from your mind, or it may have been a lucky guess. But the important thing I think is not to get too carried away.”

Tree nodded vigorously, Erik jabbed the cigarette into the ashtray with repetitive violence, and their food arrived.

“Well, I’d like to hear it, dammit,” Erik said.

“I wasn’t saying I didn’t want to hear,” Thom said.

“No, you said you weren’t going to believe it.”

“I didn’t,” Thom protested.

“Well what the hell do you think you said? And shit, if he can pick a number out of my mind while I’m sleeping—how about that guy over there?” Erik pointed to an older man nursing his coffee, a ski cap tight around his ears. “What’s that guy thinking?”

“I can’t,” said Tree, and his face reddened. “It doesn’t . . . I don’t . . .”

“He’s thinking he’d like to get the waitress naked,” Thom said with too much on his fork, trying to pare down the load. “Just like the rest of us who are too afraid to admit it.”

“That’s the spirit!” Erik took a swig of his beer. “That’s exactly right. He’s thinking he’d like a pair. See those greedy eyes? That one sitting up there”—he gestured with the bottle to a woman dressed as a goth, black tights on slender legs, beautiful lips with dark lipstick—“*and* the waitress.”

Thom and Tree shyly studied the goth.

“Heh heh,” Thom said, an ache in his throat. Thom’s brain repeated his mantra: *She is pretty; I am homely.*

They looked at their plates, pushing around food they were too exhausted to eat.

Thom grabbed a handful of his hair and squeezed, felt several of the strands pop from their roots. “What in the hell are we going to do? How can so many things possibly fail at once?” He tried to put a humorous tone on his words but knew he couldn’t keep it up. He was this far away from real depression, the state that puts you in bed for a couple of weeks, too weak to move.

“Hey, big guy, none of that. No despair at this table. Tree’s got it all worked out.” Erik nudged Tree.

“Uh!” Tree rubbed his side where Erik had elbowed him. “I don’t, really, I just think that . . . maybe something else might come up. Maybe we’ll eat some foreign food.”

“What in the Jesus hell are you talking about? What kind of a plan is that? We’re trying to cheer Thom up. Come on now, foreign food—we’re heading to a Thai restaurant next? Listen, this is how you do it. I’ve got an uncle that lives in one of those fancy houses in the hills, great place, there’s a hot tub, it’ll be warm and dry, big improvement right there. He’s away in Europe for three months, and I know where the spare key is. Fantastic kitchen, view of the city, we’ll get girlfriends and have them over, it’s a

hell of a place. Just to get back on our feet. You'll get your job, Thom, and then whatever happens, happens."

"Really?" Thom smiled dreamily. "We could do that?"

Erik rolled his eyes. "No, man, come on, think I'd have been staying in that apartment if I had a place like that? I was just showing Tree how to cheer somebody up."

"You sonofabitch."

"Sorry, sorry about that—this is what's going to happen. The water will have made the apartment pretty much unlivable. The landlord will tell us to get our shit and get out, because it's got a lot of repair time and they've got to check electrical and structural and all hell, and while they're at it, why not just renovate the damn thing so it gets more rent?"

Thom put his face in his hands and stared between fingers at his Italian sausage.

"We're going on a trip," Tree said.

"You dreamed this?" Thom said.

"Hey, man"—Erik pointing at Thom—"don't knock dreamboy, I told you he had a plan."

"But I'm not sure. Sometimes they don't..." Tree stared at his plate.

"Quit saying that! So your dreams don't always come true. Mine don't come true. Yours come true, Thom?"

"Not a one."

Erik brought his beer bottle down to the table with a heavy thud, "That settles it then. We leave tomorrow."

"You have got to be out of your mind. Where to, what money, why?" Thom said.

"Come on, you big worrywart, what have you got going here?" Erik said.

Thom looked hopelessly at Tree.

"I don't have anything going," Tree volunteered. "But we could find another apartment."

Erik spread his hands wide in mock indignation. "Just a minute ago you were talking about a trip. Besides. Who is going to rent to three unemployed types?"

"I have some money from my grandfather," Tree said.

Erik nodded several times. "How much?"

"Erik," Thom growled.

"Hey, it's cool, man. Don't tell me. I was just asking."

"Fifteen hundred."

Erik calculated on the ceiling for a moment and then mashed the remains of his second piece of pie into a liquidy hash with his fork. "Well, that's an extremely short apartment rental or a long trip."

"I'm going to live with my mom," Thom said.

"Where's that?"

"Central Washington."

"The hell are you going to do there? I say we just get in my car and head south, seek our futures in less rainy climes. Go to Mexico. Think about fifteen hundred bucks in Mexico. *Viva México!*" he yelled, fork in the air. Heads at

several tables turned toward Erik then back again.

Tree shifted uneasily in his seat.

"Let's get out of here," Thom said. "I want to look at the apartment again."

When they hit fresh air, Thom decided all at once he wanted the trip. He wanted to get out of town, do something different, see somewhere different. He needed to move, to ram-



ble, to let road dust and sky patch tight the various holes in his life. “I’ll do the trip,” he said.

“Yes!” said Erik. “We’ve got a plan. You’re in, right Tree?”

“Okay,” Tree nodded and smiled.

“Okay!” Erik started the car, revved it, and, with a whoosh of smoke and a bang, it gave out and would not start again.

Thom clapped his hands in glee. “I’m cursed. Let’s all of us just coast this thing into the Willamette River. Us in it.”

Erik pounded on the steering wheel.

“Tell me about your uncle again,” Tree said.

With nowhere else to go and no other way to get there—the buses wouldn’t start for several hours—they walked. Down Clinton Street to Twelfth, two miles, down Twelfth to Burnside, three miles. On Burnside a car brimming with party revelers pummeled them with fast-food remains. A milkshake struck Thom square in the chest, exploding onto Tree and Erik in a chocolatey mess. Erik turned and ran after the car, holding his middle finger up and shouting incomprehensibly. He made it a full two blocks before he ran out of steam. Thom and Tree waited, scooping off globs of milkshake.

Burnside to the river, over the bridge and the frigid glare of the Willamette River, the Superfund ecodisaster. Thom imagined the slick, rubbery bodies of suicides floating coldly under the bridge, merging into the Columbia and then finally out to sea.

They continued up through downtown and then up to Twenty-Third, three miles.

By the time they got home, they were exhausted. A note from the building manager was taped to their door. *Hi Tree, heard about the leak. Will have a look in the morn.—Bob.* As if they’d had a small issue with a leaky toilet and he’d be around to fix it when he got the chance.

Erik checked the couch and was amazed to find it dry. “Feel it! It’s dry. Think all the water soaked in?” Both roommates dutifully felt the couch.

“There’s something about this couch,” Tree said.

Thom sighed. “I’m going to bed wherever I can.”

“What’s about this couch is it’s where I’m going to sleep, that’s what’s about this couch,” Erik said. The others curled into dry corners of the apartment wherever they could find them, with clothes and scavenged dry blankets piled over them for warmth. The sound of dripping echoed through the apartment like a cave lullaby.

The apartment manager was at their door first thing in the morning with an older, well-dressed gentleman in tow.

The knocking came to Erik like announcements in foreign countries. Like undersea drums, leagues away. He

couldn’t seem to separate the sound from his dreams, and even on his feet he was unsure which part of the wrecked room the noise was coming from. He found the door, forced it open enough to look out, and the two men on the other side took a half step back. A smell of must and rot bustled past them and filled the hallway.

“*Fue una noche terrible, bien mojada,*” Erik said, and felt his voice didn’t sound right. His hair stood out at angles like the sweeping end of an abused broom.

“What?” said the gentleman.

The manager glanced at the other man, swallowed and said, “*Qué pasó?*”

“I speak English,” Erik said, confused and irritated.

“What happened?” the manager said.

“You were speaking Spanish,” Erik said, ready to close the door.

“In the night, what happened in the night?”

“Oh. Waterbed upstairs.”

“But how about with your apartment?”

“Ever seen *Titanic*?” Erik asked.

They both nodded, and Erik stared at them until he realized they wanted to come in. He wrenched at the door, then went to take a piss. When he got back, all that was left of the men was a scattering of fading shoeprints in the wet rug. One set of shoes had spent a fair amount of time at the couch, he noticed, and then Erik folded himself back into it and back to sleep.

Tree woke to the smell. It smelled like a house on the commune when a cat had died in the basement and lay undiscovered for a week. He ran to the bathroom and lost the remnants of the grilled cheese sandwich from the night before.

He found Thom and Erik in the kitchen, drinking coffee from paper cups. Thom handed him a cup.

“Electricity is off,” Thom said. “They’re worried about fire danger and other problems. It’s all old knob-and-tube wiring through here. So we went out and got coffee.”

“Thanks,” said Tree. He took a sip and let it wash down the terrible taste in his mouth. “I threw up,” he said. “That smell is terrible.”

Thom nodded. “Erik says he can’t smell it.”

Erik shrugged.

They drank their coffee and watched the rain through the kitchen window. The apartment was cold and uncomfortable, and Thom filed through his life looking for bright spots.

“Boy, that was a fun night.” Thom raised his cup in a mock toast.

Tree got a pair of needle-nose pliers from a kitchen drawer and began to dismantle the small wire house that he’d made and set on the kitchen table in a spirit of home.

"I think we're going on a trip," Thom said.

"Not you too," Erik said. "Why aren't I having these dreams?"

"No dream," Thom said. "I just think we should get out of here."

"I have eighteen dollars to my name," Erik said in what both roommates felt was an uncharacteristic moment of truth. "And you know where my fucking car is."

"You're a realist today," Thom said. "It doesn't really become you."

"Well, I don't think you can even take the Greyhound anywhere for eighteen bucks. Maybe Salem or something, but I'm talking about getting out of here."

"I've got a couple of hundred," Thom said.

"You guys know how much I have." Tree's disassembled house quickly morphed into a bus shape under his pliers. "I'm in." He paused and looked up at them. "I can front you."

But why? Thom wondered. We don't even really know each other. A faint paranoia coursed through him. There was a knock, and Tree went to get the door.

It was the building manager, his hair tied up in a ponytail. He wore a Grateful Dead shirt, slacks, and work boots, and took a step back when the smell hit him.

"Hey, Tree," he said fondly. He worried his lip with his teeth, raised his eyebrows. "That's quite a smell."

"The rug, I guess."

"Ah, it'll have to go." He exhaled dramatically and put his hands on his hips. "So I've got bad news for you guys."

"We've got to move out?" Erik said.

"Everything has got to go. We're going to overhaul the three apartments entirely." They nodded and stared at the floor. "I'm sorry about that, guys. Here's your deposit back, Tree." He handed Tree an envelope.

"The couch was here when I moved in," said Tree.

The manager studied the couch through the opening in the doorway, "I know," he said. "It's funny. This morning the owner said to make sure you take the couch with you. Not sure why he would say that. I can have the workmen chuck it for you, though, if you don't want it. Or better yet, you guys could just haul it over to the Goodwill. It's only two blocks away. That might be easier, if you don't mind—I'd probably have to charge you otherwise."

"It is a nice couch," said Thom, thinking of the extent of his furniture. "The owner came by this morning?"

"Yeah, we spoke with . . ." Pointing at Erik. "Sorry, I don't know your names, just Tree since he's on the lease. I'm Bob."

Erik and Thom introduced themselves.

"This morning?" said Thom.

"Yeah, we knocked at about eight a.m."

Tree and Thom stared at Erik, who wore his eyebrow-raised, open-eyed look.

"Okay," said Tree.

"I'm really sorry," Bob said. "There's just nothing really to be done about it."

Thom nodded.

"You could let us take a couple of swings at the people upstairs," Erik said.

"You've got to wait in line for that, my friend."

They busied themselves with undoing what they'd done just a week before. Packing clothes, this time divvying up what could be taken on a trip and setting the rest aside to be donated, thrown away, and forgotten.

There was not much to pack. Tree had his wire and pliers, the Bible he'd never opened, some slightly damp dream journals, a change of clothes. Fetching a knife from the kitchen, he opened the Bible and cut carefully along its spine, separating the Old Testament from the New. He packed the Old. With a deep sigh, he threw his entire sculpture collection in a box, and the box in the dumpster.

The fact that every several years or so Erik lost everything he owned kept his possessions to a minimum. He had extensive personal hygiene equipment, a few shirts, and several hats, one of which was straw. He took off his shirt and put his straw hat on and did some maneuvers in front of a mirror. He had a fake beard, which he'd never used but always liked the idea of using. He threw it all in a pillowcase and busied himself with eating whatever was left in the refrigerator and cupboards, which included a Jell-O mix that he ate by the spoonful. The sickness that followed he tried to chase away by eating half a block of cheese.

Thom spent the first thirty minutes inventorying his computer gadgetry, packing it, taking it out, and putting it in the Goodwill pile, feeling heartbroken, and then packing it again. It was a nice laptop, if a bit old, he admitted, going over its curves. All of his projects were uploaded to a server, so he could access them from anywhere. But still, the laptop was a connection to a whole people, to a different people, his people. Most of his friends he'd never met in the flesh, though he would never admit this publicly, especially not to Erik or Tree. His virtual, fleshless relationships were the domain of the ultranerd, the hopelessly introverted and socially maladjusted, especially in the absence of real relationships. If his mother knew the level to which he had sunk, she would weep. A Brazilian expert on TCP/IP protocols, a German and an Israeli working on PHP stuff, a Taiwanese and Chinese guy who were working on rival open-source databases, a Japanese Objective-C guy, a girl in Vermont who specialized in information design, several South American Apache-server people, a scattering of Americans and Canadians. They weren't *friend* friends. He knew little to nothing about their lives. But they were friends, and he loved them deeply. They didn't talk about

much but their area of specialty, and they all seemed to utilize a wry banter that acknowledged that they knew where they stood in their own societies, which team they were on. A few of them had become filthy rich, but mostly they were people with unmatched attention spans, people who could spend fifteen hours a day for weeks in front of a computer working on a murky, obscure problem that would most likely never be appreciated except by a tiny handful of people in their world. Most of them had shitty jobs working for companies that didn't understand them. They were close to the machine. They thought with steadfast logical minds and occasional explosive bouts of creativity that, at times, would reengineer the way machines interacted with humans or the way machines interacted with other machines.

The phone rang, and Thom heard Erik say: "Stop calling. We're leaving, you molester-bastard-pervert-cock-sucker."

"Don't tell them we're leaving," Tree said belatedly from down the hall.

Thom shut his door. He decided to take the laptop. With it he threw in his cheap digital camera, a radio modem, and a couple of changes of clothes that he carefully folded and packed around the equipment in a backpack. He decided to send his pots and pans, desk, and whatever else to the Goodwill. He thought his life was changing; it must be changing. Fate had certainly cleared out any holds he'd had on life here.

Then in the living room he ran into his books. With an ache in his throat, Thom went through his entire sodden collection, water still an inch deep at the bottom of the box. Bloated and falling apart, their glues melted, covers warped. He pulled out a reprint of *Independent People* by Halldór Laxness, and the sheep on the cover came off, stuck to his thumb. The pages of Haruki Murakami's *Dance Dance Dance* were oatmeal, indistinguishable from each other. And a book apiece by Rick Moody, E. Annie Proulx, and Richard Powers respectively had become like Siamese triplets, the whole inseparable without fatally damaging each of its parts. All of them doomed to the Dumpster.

The couch was surprisingly light. Erik and Thom each carried an end and Tree ran around opening doors, making sure they angled it down the stairs properly. Thom wished he had a place to store it. He briefly thought of his ex-girlfriend's basement and then wished he hadn't.

Both Erik and Thom were aware of being out in daylight, in public view for the first time in a while. Here they were, announcing they were leaving. They were taking the symbol of sedentary life and getting rid of it. They were off. They felt exultant.

They carried the couch the two blocks down Burnside and realized they were something to look at. Three men

and a couch at a stoplight. Several people waved and they smiled in return.

They came to the Goodwill parking lot and carried the couch to the garage-style entrance, the weight of it beginning to pull on them.

The man in charge of donations was in his late sixties and dressed in blue jeans and a blue sweatshirt. His face was lined and grim, and his nose projected from his face like a geometry problem gone awry. He came and stood over the couch, fingered the back of it for a while.

"I can't take this," he said. He tapped it with his shoe and inspected the stitching, picked up one end and measured the heft. "No, sir, I can't take it." He adjusted his baseball cap, revealing well-groomed gray and black hair.

"Can't take it?" Thom looked over at the wall of donations and saw a mound of couches in far rattier condition than theirs.

"Can't take it."

"Why on earth not?" Thom said.

"It's not a brand-name couch."

"It's a handmade couch," Thom said. "Don't they sell?"

"Yes, but this one won't."

Tree nodded. "There's something about this couch."

The older man nodded with him. "Yes, there is," he said.

"What are you guys talking about? It's a perfectly nice couch." Thom waved one arm up and down and tried to tamp down the confusion. "If we weren't leaving, I'd keep it. What's wrong with it?"

"Do I know you from somewhere?" Erik said.

The man squinted his eyes at Erik and then shook his head decisively.

"Hmm," Erik said. He rubbed his middle finger over the scrub of a newly shaved mustache. "Okay, okay." He looked at Thom and Tree. "Well, this is no setback, guys. We'll just dump it in your dumpster there." He pointed to a giant Dumpster on the edge of the parking lot.

"I can't let you do that."

"What? Come on. The hell are we going to do with it?"

"You could try William Temple. It's another second-hand store down Twenty-third, on Glisan, about six, seven blocks from here."

"Seven blocks from here." Erik's voice climbed an octave. "We've brought the damn thing far enough."

"Sorry, can't help you," the man said and walked away. Erik hauled back and kicked the base of the couch.

"Come on," said Thom. "It's our last Portland task. It's the last trial."

"What's he going to do if we just leave it," Erik mouthed and jerked his thumb at the old man.

"Come on," said Thom.

"I've got it." Tree stood at Erik's end, placed his hands under the couch, and squatted, waiting for Thom.

Thom picked up his end, and they backed out of the loading bay. Erik followed.

“What if they don’t take it at this Willard place?” Erik said. “There are buses leaving right now!”

“William,” Thom said. “I suspect they’ll take it. That guy was nutty. There’s nothing wrong with this couch.” With Thom walking backward holding the front end of the couch, they returned to Burnside and Twenty-third.

Twenty-third was the most fashionable and ritziest of Portland’s streets. Full of posh, expensive shops and fancy restaurants. Only Erik had felt at home on the street, but now he continually looked over his shoulder, making sure none of his past marks were about. It was the kind of street that made Thom feel larger, more stooped, fleshier, more clumsy. Beautiful women were everywhere.

At the first block, a woman in her forties pulled up in a Mercedes.

“Looking good, boys. After this, I’ve got a couple at my house you can move around.”

“You’ll have to wait in line, ma’am. We’re wanted from coast to coast for this work,” Erik said, finding his voice.

“I can imagine, I can imagine. What’s your job then?” She winked at Erik.

“I’m in charge of precision.” He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

“Oh my.” She winked again and drove off.

“This isn’t so bad,” Erik mused. He rolled his shoulders, cased the street.

Halfway to Davis Street, a group of four young women parted to let them through, smiling and waving them on. A small, lithe brunette with a frightening number of freckles smiled directly at Thom. Thom couldn’t remember the last time a woman had smiled at him. He chuckled to himself, a pleasant tickle along his spine. *I’m fine. How are you?* His brain carried on conversations with her for the next block. We don’t look like workmen, he thought. We just look like some guys carrying a couch. We’re just a couple of guys carrying a couch on the poshest street in Portland. The couch felt light and comfortable in his hands.

“How about letting me ride on the couch?” Erik said. “We might as well give these people a nice show.”

Thom rolled his neck. “We’ve got a trip. I don’t think your riding on the couch is going to help our progress much. Let’s just get it there.”

At Everett they set the couch down on the corner and waited for the light to change. Tree instinctively sat on it to rest, and the two roommates followed, which brought a drove of honking, waving, and laughter from cars driving by.

“This is really the oddest experience,” said Erik. “If I’d known about this phenomenon earlier, I’d have been out here every day with this couch.”

Thom nodded. It suddenly felt like he was part of

something. They were somehow making headway in the world. They’d received a social upgrade, just for carrying a couch.

A car pulled up to the curb, and a man leaned out the window. “Performance art?”

Thom chuckled. “No—”

“Yes, sir,” said Erik. “What do you think?”

“I love it, I love it.” He reached his arm out the window toward Erik. “Where’s your hat? Here’s a fiver.”

Erik’s jaw could be heard snapping open. He leapt up, shook the man’s hand, and took the fiver. “Well, I’ll be dipped in shit,” he said when the man had driven off.

“So will I,” said Thom.

Erik did a jig and sunk the fiver deep in a pocket. “Let’s stay here. We’re artists!”

Thom shook his head. “Ah geez. We’re going on a trip. Let’s keep moving.”

The light turned green, and Erik took up Tree’s end of the couch. A group of people from the opposite corner called out and waved, and they smiled. Thom tried to gauge if these reactions were condescending or the type of reaction a crowd had to a freak-circus act and reassured himself they weren’t. They turned right at Glisan, following the directions, and Thom thought he felt something shift within the couch.

“I’ve got to rest for a second.” Erik dropped his end of the couch about twenty steps down the street, and Thom lurched to a stop and swore.

“I don’t think this is the right turn,” Tree said.

Erik sat on the couch. They were down the street slightly and shaded by trees, out of sight of traffic and pedestrians.

Thom stepped out in the street and looked for the William Temple sign. “It’s right there,” said Thom. Tree nodded, but to Thom he looked bafflingly unconvinced. “It’s right there,” he said again. “Half a block away. Let’s do this.”

They picked up the couch again, this time with a great effort.

“What in the hell?” Erik’s face was turning red.

“We’ve come a pretty good distance.” Thom backed down the street. He felt tired, and his arms ached. They made it to the loading door of William Temple and rang the bell.

“Finally,” Thom said.

“I agree, gets damn heavy after a while. But that was fun.” Erik shook his arms out. “Going to have to remember that.” He pulled the five dollar bill from his pocket and waved it at them, and then wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. It began to rain lightly.



Reader Reactions to *Couch*

Here's what a few readers thought of this book. Some you may agree with, some not so much. Please add yours here or post it on our site at smallbeerpress.com

Spring/Summer 2009 Indie Next List for Reading Groups.

"*Couch* follows the quirky journey of Thom, Erik, and Tree as they venture into the unknown at the behest of a magical, orange couch, which has its own plan for their previously boring lives. Parzybok's colorful characters, striking humor, and eccentric magical realism offer up an adventuresome read."

—Christian Crider, Inkwood Books, Tampa, FL

Jan. 2009 Indie Next List Inspired Recommendations from Indie Booksellers

"This funny novel of furniture moving gone awry is a magical realism quest for modern times. Parzybok's touching story explores the aimlessness of our culture, a society of jobs instead of callings, replete with opportunities and choices but without the philosophies and vocations we need to make meaningful decisions."

—Josh Cook, Porter Square Books, Cambridge, MA



"*Couch* hits on an improbable, even fantastic premise, and then rigorously hews to the logic that it generates, keeping it afloat (at times literally) to the end."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"Delightfully lighthearted writing. . . . Occasionally laugh-out-loud funny, the enthusiastic prose carries readers through sporadic dark moments . . . Parzybok's quirky humor recalls the flaws and successes of early Douglas Adams."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Besides romance, fantasy is perhaps the last of the popular genres to get an overhaul for the 21st century. Not much has changed in the genre since the invention of Bilbo Baggins. Hundreds of writers have slavishly imitated—or outright ripped off—Tolkien in ways that connoisseurs of other genres would consider shameless. What Parzybok has done here in adapting the same old song to a world more familiar to the reader is to revive the genre and make it relevant again. And by making the magical MacGuffin a beloved household item that nearly everyone has a complicated relationship with, he gives the story the depth and allure of the best modern literary fiction."

—Paul Constant, *The Stranger*

"*Couch* is a quick and funny read, a short fable that ensnares us in its quixotic intentions and encourages us to believe for a short time in something magic, even if it is just a couch."

—About.com

"A fun adventure with a seductive premise."
—Popmatters.com

"The essential message of *Couch* appears to be that the world and our lives would be better if we all got off our couches (literal and metaphorical) a bit more often."

—*The Zone*

"The book succeeds as a conceptual art piece, a literary travelogue, and a fantastical quest."

—*Willamette Week*

"The world of furniture has been given an Odysseus. I was completely swept into the story of three loafers who burden them-

selves with a couch and are given a chance to risk everything and maybe save the world a little. It's easy to look at the world today and feel a sense of hopelessness, but *Couch* reminds us that there is still magic in the world and that we are the heroes of our own stories."

—Mara Lynn Luther, Chapter One Book Store, Hamilton, MT

Your Notes

"Beyond the good old-fashioned story, *Couch* meditates on heroism and history, but above all, it's an argument for shifting your life around every now and then, for getting off the couch and making something happen."

—*The L Magazine*

"A lot of people are looking for magic in the world today, but only Benjamin Parzybok thought to check the sofa, which is, I think, the place it's most likely to be found. *Couch* is a slacker epic: a gentle, funny book that ambles merrily from Coupland to Tolkien, and gives couch-surfing (among other things) a whole new meaning."

—Paul La Farge

"My wife has a set of stories that she describes as 'guy stories,' a category that contains such notable tales as *Easy Rider*, *City Slickers* and *Deliverance*. In such a story a group of young males decide to set themselves to some inconsequential task. The journey is filled with adversity, strife, joy and tragedy as the men struggle to finish their quest. In the end the characters discover who they really are. *Couch* by Benjamin Parzybok is one of these stories with a healthy dose of magic realism added for seasoning."

—*SF Site*

"One of the strangest road novels you'll ever read. It's a funny and fun book, and it's also a very smart book. Fans of Tom Robbins or Christopher Moore should enjoy this."

—Handee Books

"This novel made me think, laugh, cringe, and question. It doesn't get much better than that in what I look for in a book! Highly recommended!"

—Stephanie, Twenty-Third Avenue Books

"What I like about the novel is its epic scope and the constant, unapologetic insistence that there is something magical about this inanimate piece of furniture."

—Andrew McCarthy, *The Daily Evergreen*

“Benjamin Parzybok’s debut novel elevates this common piece of furniture from the stuff of everyday magic to something much more powerful.”

—Jessica Schubert McCarthy, *The Daily Evergreen*

“Once upon a time, Donald Barthelme, Jonathan Lethem, and Umberto Eco attended a film festival together. The featured flicks were *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Fitzcarraldo*, and *Repo Man*. Inspired by this odd bill of fare, the trio set out to collaborate on a novel. The result was Benjamin Parzybok’s debut, *Couch*.”

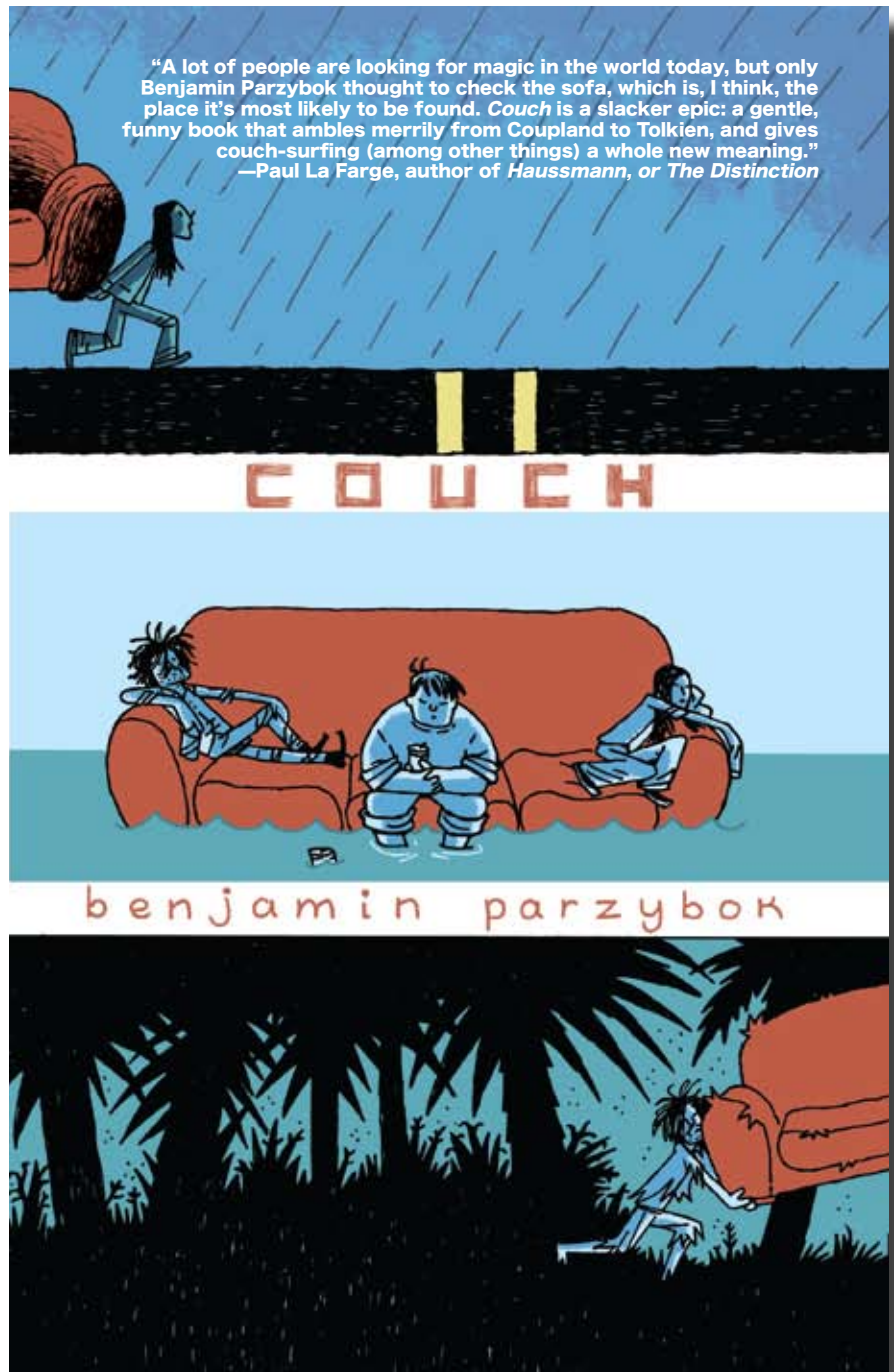
—Paul DiFilippo, *The B&N Review*

“It is an upholstered Odyssey unlike any other you are likely to read. It is funny, confusing in places, wild and anarchic. It is part Quixote, part Murakami, part Tom Robbins, part DFS showroom. It has cult hit written all over it.”

—Scott P., *Me and My Big Mouth*

“An amazing debut novel about three roommates who get evicted and take their couch with them on a journey that becomes a epic quest that becomes one of the most truly weird and original books I’ve read in ages.”

—Karen M., *A Stranger Here Myself*



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