

# SHERWOOD NATION

**A NOVEL**



**BENJAMIN PARZYBOK**

*A Reader's Guide  
and Companion*



## Benjamin Parzybok

is the author of the novels *Couch* and *Sherwood Nation* and has been the creator/co-creator of many other projects, including *Gumball Poetry*, The Black Magic Insurance Agency (city-wide, one night alternate reality game), and Project Hamad.

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.

His short stories have been published in a variety of magazines and anthologies including *Sliver of Stone*, *West Branch*, *Strange Horizons*, *Long Hidden*, *Lightspeed*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Eleven Eleven*, and *Bellevue Literary Review*. He is currently working on two novels.

He lives in Portland, Oregon, with the writer Laura Moulton and their two children. His website is [levinofearth.com](http://levinofearth.com).

### Credits

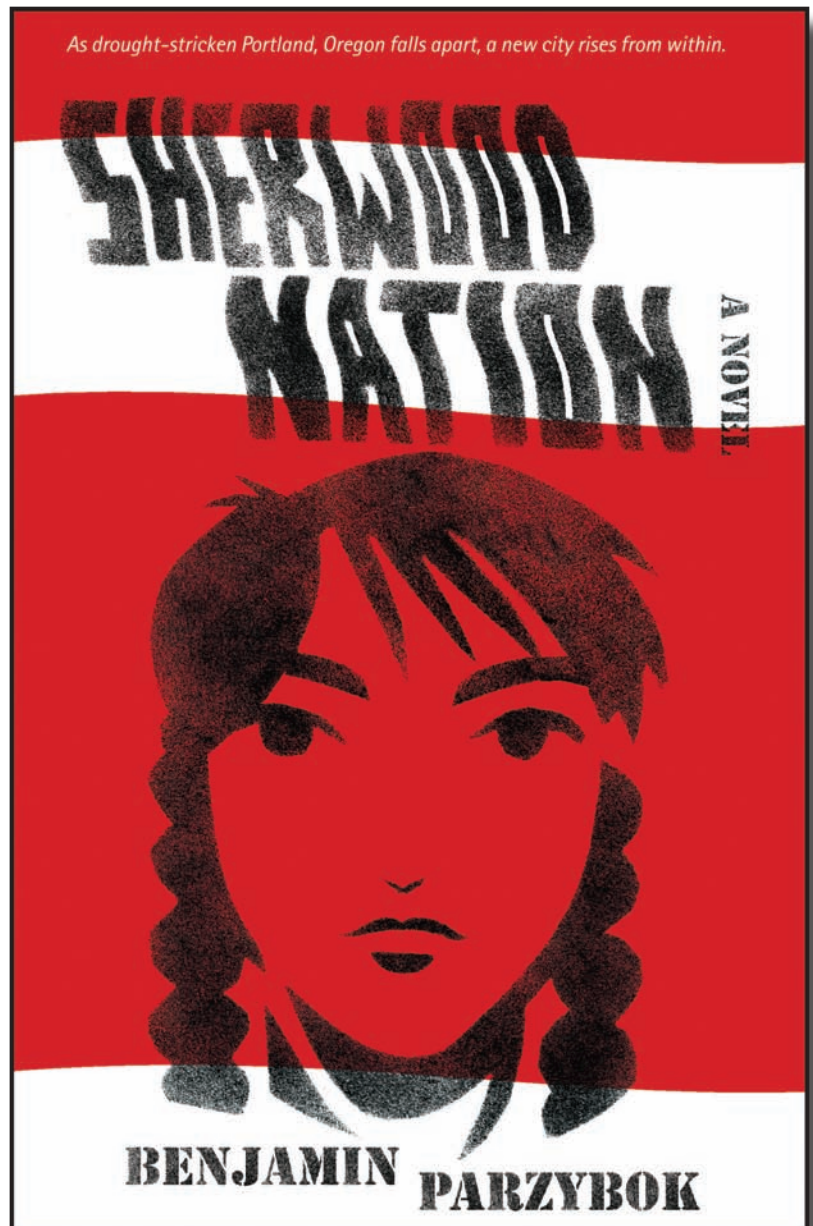
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*Sherwood Nation* is quite an ambitious undertaking. You've created a not-too-distant future world in which most of the available water has dried up (what remains must be doled out in tiny daily rations by government officials,) and you've chosen Portland, Oregon—a city known for its rain, bisected by one river and bordered by another—as the setting. As a Portlander I felt a sort of dual frisson of recognition and defamiliarization to see my neighborhood so completely reimagined as an “aridified” landscape where water has become the basic currency . . .

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*Sherwood Nation* playlist: aka a kick-ass mixtape.

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What needed research? Tunnels and tunnel building, droughts, water distribution, city politics, enclaves, the National Guard, warlords, activists, secession movements, the economics of communities—even video games.

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It was morning and the power was not yet on. Zach and Renee lay in the heat of the bed listening to the city wake outside the building's windows.

“We should learn how to rain-dance,” Renee said. They were new to the relationship, and she could feel his hesitance to speak, the tentativeness to him, as if she were some toothy, unpredictable animal he'd invited into his house. She pressed her lips into his shoulder and wanted to bite him there. His skin left a taste of salt on her lips.

“Why don't you?” Zach said.

“Nah.”

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## A Late Night Library Interview with Benjamin Parzybok

Benjamin Parzybok's second novel *Sherwood Nation* is a topical look at a young woman's unexpected rise to power at the forefront of a secession and water rights movement in Portland, Oregon. The author, himself a longtime Portland resident, was interviewed by Anne Rasmussen of the *Late Night Library* about the book

**ANNE RASMUSSEN:** *Sherwood Nation* is quite an ambitious undertaking. You've created a not-too-distant future world in which most of the available water has dried up (what remains must be doled out in tiny daily rations by government officials,) and you've chosen Portland, Oregon a city known for its rain, bisected by one river and bordered by another—as the setting. As a Portlander I felt a sort of dual frisson of recognition and defamiliarization to see my neighborhood so completely reimagined as an “aridified” landscape where water has become the basic currency. On the one hand, creating a futuristic world within the familiar grid and landmarks of an existing city might seem to make the writer's job easier. But this future Portland is rendered in such detail (both before and after the revolution and annexation) that you can hardly be accused of taking shortcuts. What about Portland, culturally or geographically, appealed to you as the right setting for this story? Were you tempted at any point in the writing to set it elsewhere, or to invent a new city entirely?

**BEN PARZYBOK:** I suppose the easiest answer might be: I live in and love this city. My previous book started in Portland as well. It's a particular pleasure to be able to weave a fictional layer on top of a real place, so that the real world continues to reverberate with the story.

It's also easy to imagine a secessionist movement here in Portland. I'm not the first to fictionalize one here, and I suspect I will not be the last. There's a lot that separates us — the Northwest — from the rest of our country, culturally, geographically, and politically.

We are — coincidentally! — in a serious drought now in Oregon, but of course a natural disaster of this kind is very improbable in our region. I talked to several local water experts about the potential of this occurring in order to build in more backstory, and the answer essentially is: Our mountains are like bottomless wells. Are there other cities where this scenario is much more



likely? Absolutely. But then, I don't live in those cities.

**AR:** I loved that the revolution is led by a kick-ass, twenty-something woman. Renee, a barista and activist gets caught up in something bigger than she realizes and finds herself turned fugitive—and folk hero—practically overnight. Instead of turning herself in or trying to disappear, she doubles down and digs in, embracing the “Maid Marian” persona to transform herself into one of the most powerful people in the drought-hobbled city. We meet a number of compelling characters in the novel: Renee's boyfriend Zach, who's sympathetic but conflicted about his girlfriend's swift rise to power, Gregor, an aging neighborhood drug lord whose favor Renee must win to maintain security and peace, and Gregor's son Jamal, who hopes his devotion to the cause will erase past transgressions (or at least help him get laid), among many others, but Renee is unquestionably the central figure. Were there particular literary or historical figures who inspired or influenced this character as you imagined her? Did you always have a female protagonist in mind for this story?

**BP:** Maid Marian is a play on the Robin Hood mythology. She's the leader of the revolutionaries. I always

envisioned a woman playing that role. I think part of it is frustration with the last few decades of politics, and feeling like each time we were on the verge of taking a radically new direction, finding more of the same. I wanted someone to step up and run things differently, and it was much easier to see a woman in that role — in this case, a dictator in a dictatorship that worked for the people. (I'm using the traditional meaning of dictator, here, coined to mean: A person appointed by the Roman senate to rule in times of emergency. It did not have the negative connotation it does today).

I also very much like the idea of gender and role-flipping, (as in, a female Robin Hood) both as a way to safeguard against clichés and to upset expectations. For inspiration, there were many incredible stories of activists that I pulled on for inspiration in character (but not necessarily their specific stories): Civil rights, women's suffrage, and environmental activists. And of course, the tale of Robin Hood is really about a bunch of anti-poverty activists.

**AR:** You manage to capture both the good and bad aspects of an ideological movement—not just the fervor and idealism of the “true believers” but the media's fascination and the way in which public interest or favor reaches a tipping point. Were there particular activist communities or historical events that you studied or drew inspiration from? I'm thinking of local examples like Dignity Village, as well as more national ones, like Occupy. Did any of these real-life examples stand out to you as Sherwood began to take shape in your imagination?

**BP:** Yes, thanks. Dignity Village and Right 2 Dream Too (R2D2) are great examples. I've followed R2D2 very closely as my partner, Laura Moulton, runs Street Books and so is down there talking with R2D2 frequently and knows the dynamics of that situation pretty well. Occupy was another huge one, of course. It was fascinating to have that all spring up and take place during the writing of the book, as if the news was intent on being my own private research department. (To say nothing of this exceptional drought in California). I'm not sure which movement influenced it most — certainly a lot of it sprung from imagination, and some of it from activist projects I've worked on in the past.

It seems forever ago now, but when I was in college we blocked I-5 as an action against the U.S. military intervention in the war in El Salvador. I remember sitting handcuffed on a bus in police custody afterward, giddy from what we'd done, especially considering all of the personality clashes that had led up to it. And then, with fascination, watching what the media did with the action, each spinning it out with some different filter.

**AR:** Cybertechnology is a relative rarity in this world (power is scarce, so the breakdown makes sense). Most people get around by bicycle or on foot; messages are

scrawled on scraps of paper or delivered by hand signals or Morse code. The few who still have access to technology waste it for personal gain. (The cowardly, somewhat buffoonish mayor holes up in City Hall playing first-person shooter video games while his police force cracks-down violently on the Sherwood Nation organizers.) I'll confess that Maid Marian's face-to-face approach and Sherwood's “map room,” with its hand-drawn diagrams and slips of paper triggered a powerful nostalgia for me. It made me consider the ways in which media overload and personal technologies, for all their potential to connect us—this interview, for example—



often simply facilitate further isolation. It felt almost as if those technologies would need to stop functioning for a community like Sherwood to form. What were your thoughts on the role of technology (or lack thereof) as you imagined a city falling apart and reinventing itself?

**BP:** I'm a programmer by profession and close to the machine, and so perhaps my desire to fashion a world in which technology has almost entirely withered was somewhat ironical wish-fulfillment. But it's also my experience that the systems we all rely on are tenuous, requiring massive infrastructure. In any kind of collapse — especially where electricity sources are questionable — electronics-based technology will be the first to go. That said, I also was interested in working in a scenario in which physical, human connection was key to the proper functioning of the government, and the citizens had to invent their own technologies to make-do. As much as technology brings us closer to large numbers

of people, it also separates us, trivializes our relationships, pushes us into trenches of like-minded individuals much more than real-life encounters. We're in the very early stages of this big internet experiment, and as a maker of this technology I have a lot of hope, but also a lot of skepticism.

**AR:** How did you keep track of all those details (your research, the systems you were developing and character/story continuity) as you wrote? Did you create your own Sherwood/Portland map room?

**BP:** I love the idea of a real-time map room, but of course since I — unlike in the book — had power at my place, I used an app called Scrivener to keep track of details. There were many details to keep track of — from character arcs (I think there are 6 POVs — at one point I separated all of them and read their arcs independently) to drought and secession research I'd done. I don't have the best memory, and so this was a godsend. I'm now remembering that I \*did\* cover a wall in sticky notes once, but I think once covered, I never looked at it again.

I felt both compelled and frightened (and sort of exhilarated) about how entirely plausible a future you've envisioned here. With an aging water infrastructure breaking down across the U.S. and stories about Detroit's water shut-off, California's record drought, and the contamination of drinking water filling the news, the scenario you've imagined here feels almost inevitable. And Renee's activism is solution-focused: the book is full of practical details and strategies for coping with a large-scale breakdown of vital resources. Some succeed, others fail, and a few seem downright silly, but the story lets all these efforts find their own outcomes. If you found yourself faced with a similar crisis in real life, what three books (fiction or nonfiction) would you turn to for inspiration and/or practical guidance, and why? (Let's suspend disbelief to assume that you can bring three books with you . . .)

**BP:** I would suppose that in a future like I've imagined, books would become very coveted objects. My grandfather used to buy books based on size (i.e. the James Michener books were a good buy, lots of text for the money), and I can see how in a scarcity-situation you might consider books of good heft to last you through long dark times. Along that vein, I read George Eliot's *Middlemarch* for the first time this year and immediately upon finishing it I realized it wouldn't bother me at all to turn back and start it again. What a masterpiece. Also: decidedly a good buy, on the number of pages front, and about a community undergoing change. Second: I have

to admit, I love my *Joy of Cooking*. There are a lot of other wonderful cookbooks, but say you can't remember what to do with an endive, or how to make a Galette, or how one might start an herb garden? *Joy of Cooking* has got you covered. It's also expanded for every new era (mine includes the front copy line "4,500 RECIPES FOR THE WAY WE COOK NOW"), so I'm sure there'd be a post-collapse edition, including expanded sections on wood-fire cooking, etc. (for what it's worth, the book already has a deep section on cooking over fires). And Third: This is probably cheating, but I'd definitely use my last choice on *The Story of Civilization* by Will and Ariel Durant. This husband and wife team churned out eleven volumes (over four million words) on the history of civilization, from the ancients onward. And they were fantastic, compelling writers, telling the most important human story of all time. All of them.

**AR:** Ha! Nice choices. I never would have guessed *Joy of Cooking*, but it makes so much sense now that I think about it! It really is a comprehensive tome. (I've always enjoyed the deadpan prose stylings of its "small game" recipes: "Soak overnight refrigerated in salted water: 1 porcupine," and "If possible trap 'possum and feed it on milk and cereals for 10 days before killing," or, perhaps my favorite, "Draw and cut free from the shell: 1 armadillo.") A perfect end-times companion book!

Speaking of finding art in unexpected places, I was psyched to learn that you were co-creator of *Gumball Poetry*, one of my favorite Portland literary institutions (1999-2006). When I moved away from Portland in 2001, I sought those machines out on every return visit — there was something really magical about being able to buy a little capsule of original art for a quarter. And there was that oracular quality to having poems dispensed in that way — and with gum! Or maybe I'm just a sucker for tiny, mysterious prizes. Can you tell us how the idea originally came about, how folks submitted work — did you have criteria for accepting or rejecting work for a given issue? And how many places did you eventually reach at the project's peak?

**BP:** Laura and I were living in Taiwan when that got dreamed up. I have said before that I felt like poetry saved my life, and I think it's true, and yet at the same time very few of my friends were reading it. It gets equated with academia and dryness, of those long tortuous afternoons in tenth grade English. And so I wanted to inject it in a completely different format, to put it in bars and cafes, to de-pedestalize it, to rough it up and make it cheap and dirty and sexy and sweet. Many assumed that the machines would vend cheesy lyrical poetry, and so it



was with great pleasure that we stocked it with what was really excellent (IMO, obviously!), engaging work. As far as submissions, we accepted poetry through our website (no longer in existence, sadly) and via PO Box. Normally we read about 600—1000 poems for each issue (of about 20 poems), so the review process was competitive. I do wish poetry got more love — that's one of the things I find so appealing in reading Roberto Bolaño's work, poets are always badass. They're hero-ized. I recently went to a Bianca Stone reading and was blown away/fell in love/nearly wept. The work that for me eliminated the option of ending oneself was Jim Harrison's Letters to Yesenin — a series of thirty poems fashioned like letters, to the dead poet Yesenin, who wrote his suicide note in his own blood and then hung himself. Voila!

At its heyday, *Gumball Poetry* had about 18 locations — as far away as New Jersey and New Orleans — and we were publishing four issues a year. For the record, that's a lot of poems in capsules that need to be assembled and shipped. We used to have big 'stuffing' parties to put an issue together, and invite hordes of people. It was great fun, but hard to keep up. Carlos Reyes once told me that every journal only lasts as long as the publisher has energy for it. I have to admit, at the time I was a little peeved. We were changing publishing, man! But alas, in the end he was right.

Also: I totally want to read whatever edition of *Joy of Cooking* that you have . . .

**AR:** On the subject of community connection, how soon do you feel comfortable sharing a novel-in-progress with others and who (aside from your publisher) do you trust to give you feedback?

**BP:** I have a long-standing, active writer's group in Portland which was kind enough to read the book when it was in far worse shape. I'm extremely grateful to them, as that's no small feat. We've read the novels of others in there as well, though of course we mostly work on short stories. That said, I think the novel was more or less 'in the closet' for a couple of years before I shared it. The ideal, in my mind, would be to get feedback after the draft is done and you've gone back through it a few (dozen) times. Feedback is a little hard to get on something this size, so you want to make sure you're not wasting their time and yours by getting feedback on issues you're already aware of. This can be hard, because the longer you work on it, the more you want to show off. Regarding the quality of the feedback — someone has an axiom about that, to the effect of: Hear well a reviewer speak on what parts aren't working, but don't take any of the advice on how to fix them. I find this about 85% true.

**AR:** *Sherwood Nation* is your second novel with Small Beer Press, which also published your debut novel, *Couch*. Can you talk a little bit about your experience working with them, both on *Couch* and *Sherwood Nation*? What drew you to Small Beer Press when you were originally looking for places to send your manuscript?

**BP:** Small Beer Press publishes a lot of incredible authors that I really admire. Kelly Link, Maureen F. McHugh, Karen Joy Fowler — and they published last year's Oregon Book Award winner, Ursula K. Le Guin. What I love about them most is their indie-spirit and their joy at taking on books that are difficult to wedge into a single genre. If you want your genre with an intelligent literary bent (or your literary works a little weird), they're your press.

Small Beer Press pulled my first book from the slush pile, for which I am eternally grateful. This turn was a bit different as I have an agent and worked with him to negotiate the contract. But overall, the experience was similar. They care a lot about the books they put out. They've read this book more times than I'm willing to admit out loud, and offered editorial suggestions on it when it was a dark, fledgling of a manuscript, unable to lift its beak from the nest properly. Small presses are where a lot of the action is these days, and they're putting out incredible books. Just look at local greats: Tin House, Hawthorne Books, and Propeller Books, among others.

**AR:** Without giving away the ending of *Sherwood Nation*, I'll say that it feels like you've left the door open to the possibility of letting the story continue. Have you considered setting more books in this particular future world, or continuing any of the story lines you started here?

**BP:** I think that's a fun idea. Based on the ending, the sequel would be a very different work, and certainly a direction that would be fun to explore. But, I think someone else may need to do that. After a bunch of false starts and short stories, just this last week I figured out what I'd really like to work on next, and it's a completely different sort of project. I need to keep it buried in its little protective shell while it grows for a while yet, though.

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<http://latenightlibrary.org/benjamin-parzybok/>



## Questions to get the discussion things going

*It may be worth checking Drought Monitor (droughtmonitor.unl.edu) before the discussion.*

Renee is working part-time and a perma-student before greatness is thrust upon her. Without the impetus of the water theft, would she have been the same person?

Renee changes as her responsibilities increase and their is friction between the domestic and work parts of her life. How do people manage the work/life divide in an ever-on economy?

In *Sherwood Nation* a movement accretes around Renee even as the country has obviously spun out of control of the central government. Is there a need within us for leaders? Is a good narrative the strongest part of a leader?

The west coast has been in a drought situation for many years. In Central California land is sinking because so many wells are being drilled for water. What will be the tipping point for societal behavioral change?

Archaeologists now think that weather changes are the reason for power changes and population movements in the past. What weather-related migrations are happening now?

Since the industrial revolution humanity has often tried to find engineering solutions to problems such as growing populations in dry Western US states needing more water. However, since the time of Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), there have been some who have expected the human population of the planet to overstrain the capacity of the Earth to support it. What solutions are needed in the next twenty years?

In *Sherwood Nation* electricity is being rationed to just a couple of hours per day. What electric-powered items could and couldn't you live without?

Nevel's reaction to stress—digging a huge hole!—is unusual, but effective. Are there other reactions to stress in fiction that are unlikely but effective?

Nevel's family give us an insight into how Renee/Maid Marian and the city government are viewed by the people of Portland. How important is city government?





## 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.*

*Sherwood Nation* is about a woman who secedes a neighborhood and runs it as her own country, an enclave, during a period of extreme drought. Within, the city's mayor plays video games, a retiring drug dealer wishes he could read tea leaves, an ad exec digs a tunnel under his house, and a cafe barista becomes a revered hero. *Sherwood Nation's* playlist speaks to each of these, while, I hope, making a kick-ass mixtape. Enjoy!

"Fake Empire" — The National, from *Boxer*  
The empire has fallen. Let's put a little something in our lemonade! (Probably that drought-ration moonshine.)

"Scared Money" — Saul Williams, from *The Inevitable Rise and Fall of Niggy Tardust*  
A rallying call to the disenfranchised. This song is a masterpiece.

"Fuck the bullshit  
Whether from the hill or from the pulpit  
Today, I put my money  
On the fall of every culprit"

"Bag of Hammers" — Thao, from *We Brave Bee Stings and All*  
The image Thao paints here, of a woman standing on a lawn with a bag of hammers in her hand, on the verge of wreaking holy hell on the house in front of her, is perfect. Renee, aka Maid Marian, gathers her own army on the city's front lawn.

"Halo," by The Upsidedown, from *Human Destination*  
A halo is a dangerous weapon. By my friends The Upsidedown. #portlandband

"Paris is Burning" — St Vincent, from *Marry Me*  
A city that has not burned is a city full of tinder. In order to seed the new nation with some wealth, Josh and Jamal steal a city truck full of water rations. One of them won't make it back.

"Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels)" — Arcade Fire, from *Funeral*  
The ad executive from the city's ad firm has lost his job. In his new free time, he obsessively builds a tunnel under his house for reasons he's not entirely clear.

"City of Refuge" — Abigail Washington  
While the city around them falls apart, the small nation at its center, housing twenty to thirty thousand citizens, are getting their shit together. For now, it's a refuge.

"Dog Walkers of the New Age" — Breathe Owl Breathe  
The surreality of this song mirrors how I imagine those first few days of the new nation, when you wake up unsure to what nation you belong, and what the implications of that are. A song of tentative, disorienting hope.

"The Roots Beneath Your House" — The Golden Bears, from *Wall to Wall*  
This book could have taken place just about anywhere (it's playing out now in the cities like Rio de Janeiro and Detroit and Los Angeles!). But in the end I put it in Portland, where I live, and so I have the pleasure of calling out Portland bands. My friends The Golden Bears: "When the roots beneath your house come crowning through the floor . . . lay your body down . . . and trade your famined thoughts for leaves and vines instead." #portlandband

"Belly of the Cavern" — Typhoon, from *Hunger and Thirst*  
Like this song, Nevel is on a quest, seeking in the earth for some meaning and escape. But instead his solitary quest brings him a new entrance back into the world. #portlandband

"Butter + Toast" — Reggie Watts, from *Why S\*\*\* So Crazy?*  
Reggie sings about flapjacks with agave nectar. Also: the mirrors and the mirrors within & stores full of useless shit. Zach, the new nation's strategist, would put this on long repeat, as he wanders through the deep and shallow of country logistics and supplies. "Somebody want a napkin? Too bad, motherf\*\*\*er, use your sleeve."

"Fables of Faubus" — Charles Mingus  
Gregor is a late-sixties retired drug dealer, and the general of the new nation of Sherwood. A man who has weathered incredible storms in his life. At this point, to his growing surprise, he realizes he would do anything for this fledgling nation. Even go up against the National Guard, as this incredible political piece by Mingus speaks to.

“Shame” — Hungry Ghost

Hungry Ghost is another PDX power trio. Let’s not beat around the bush: Just about everyone does the wrong thing at some point in her/his life. Major fuckups make major catalysts. Shame never sounded so good. #portlandband

Originally published—with a streamable Spotify playlist—on Largehearted Boy:

[http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2014/09/book\\_notes\\_benj\\_4.html](http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2014/09/book_notes_benj_4.html)

“The New Country” — Marisa Anderson, from *Mercury*

Yes, we repeat the cycles of history. But revolutions leave the residue of lasting change. My friend Marisa Anderson’s intricate, melancholy instrumental aptly finishes us off. #portlandband





## Research Notes

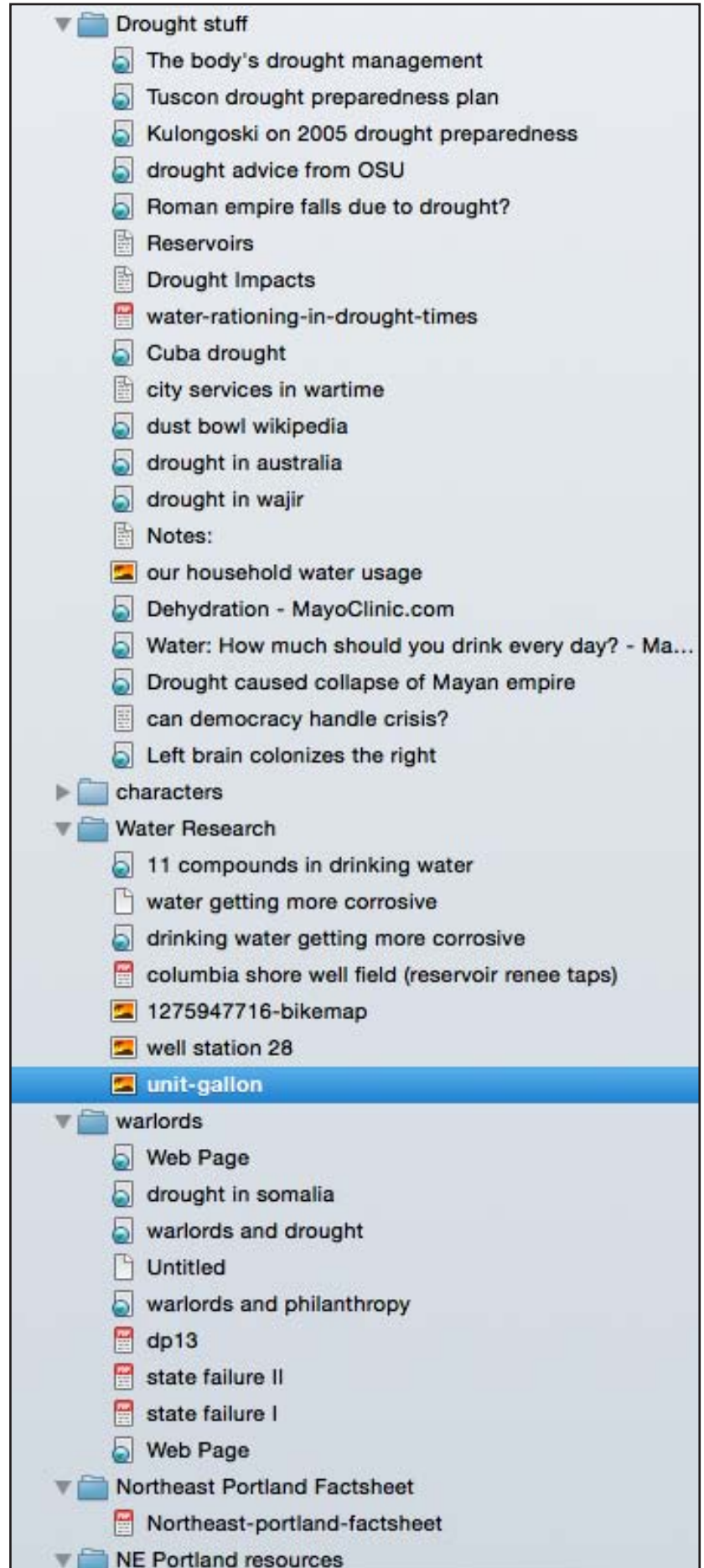
Necessary Fiction's *Research Notes series* invites authors to describe their research for a recent book, with "research" defined as broadly as they like.

*Sherwood Nation* takes place in a post-collapse Portland, Oregon. The mayor of the city is still in charge of this dwindling city, and because of an extreme, prolonged drought, all water is rationed and distributed. In the midst of this, an activist becomes a folk hero and uses her sway to secede a section of the city to run as her own nation, an enclave within the city.

There were no end to the topics that needed research: Tunnels and tunnel building, droughts, water distribution, city politics, enclaves, the National Guard, warlords, activists, secession movements, the economics of communities—even video games. At right is a partial screenshot of some of the research materials I archived in Scrivener, my novel-writing tool of choice.

Researching droughts was fascinating, because they're everywhere. They're cyclical and devastating, and they are a type of natural disaster that happens in slow-motion, creating an entirely different kind of stress on a place than just about any other crisis. I spent a lot of time reading historical accounts of the Dust Bowl, when essentially our land-depleting farming techniques in combination with a drought caused one of the worst natural disasters in our history. 100,000,000 acres were affected, and up to 500,000 thousands people were left homeless. The book was written pre-California and whew, boy. Every time I read about a culture-changing drought I was all *sweet!* *This is totally going to work.* And then I'd talk to a local hydrologist who would tell me that there's "no way we could have a drought like that in the Pacific Northwest."

But it's my manuscript, and sometimes you decide to break the rules a little. So while the drought is realistic, it does not take into account that the mountains of the Pacific Northwest are essentially bottomless wells.





One hydrologist suggested that only if the super volcano at Yellowstone blew, could we have a situation like I'd painted. So: yes to talking to real experts, and no to taking all of their advice.

I am already a fervent fan of history, and so it was with a particular joy that I began to comb back through history to study collapses, and especially what happens *after* a collapse. That's the key. Because while the book is set within a post-collapse period, inside of that, there's a semi-Utopian society being built. How do building projects work, when you're making up all the rules? Are there taxes? What are the mechanics of an internal defense force. How do you guide them to be *of* the people and *for* the people. How do you inspire rapid social change without seeding violence. What does a dictator really do?

The most interesting kind of research is when you go searching out the mechanics of something, and what you learn actually changes the book. This happened with my discovery that the term 'dictator' did not originally have a negative connotation. It was a respected title in ancient Rome for someone who took reins of the government in a time of crisis. At this point, I was writing a different book—about how a community as a whole handled crisis, and the individual stories within that.

But this re-defining of 'dictator' led me on a long journey of looking at how crises were managed—and that's when I stumbled on this passage from James Lovelock (founder of the Gaia theory and a climate change activist) where he states:

Even the best democracies agree that when a major war approaches, democracy must be put on hold for the time being. I have a feeling that climate change may be an issue as severe as a war. It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while.

Certainly a radical thought, and in the deep crisis I was fabricating, I wanted to play out this idea in the book. That what might make the most interesting book is for my characters to secede from the ill-run city about them, to handle better the urgent issues: security, food and water, and medical attention. And thus, *Sherwood Nation* was born.

Originally published in *Necessary Fiction*:

[necessaryfiction.com/blog/ResearchNotesSherwoodNation](http://necessaryfiction.com/blog/ResearchNotesSherwoodNation)





## Why Did I Write This Book?

*We asked: the author answered:*

I started this book on a two-month stay in Brazil. In my mind the driving forces were to write

- 1) A big book
- 2) a book about water and water crises
- 3) a book about slow apocalypses.

Slow apocalypse: I had become disgusted with repeatedly seeing apocalypses portrayed as large short-term events (meteor crash, space aliens, super volcanoes, etc.) rather than what I thought of as the much more likely scenario: A long period of social and civil disintegration, possibly precipitated by an event, but much more likely the cause of a condition (droughts, constrained budgets/financial collapses, long-term wars). Historically, this is the much more likely apocalypse (and here the term apocalypse is loosely used to describe the fall of

an empire, an apocalyptic thing to many of its citizens).

I wanted to create a scenario where I could see how people behaved under a constant tightening of resources. That is: I wanted to slowly bring my city to the brink of ashes, and then to watch where the phoenix might come up.

From there I became very interested in watching how different government types might respond to times of intense crisis. I do feel that democracy—at least our current iteration of it—cannot fully comprehend real crisis nor can they respond to it, set as they are on posturing and self-interests. Dictator—a horribly nasty word in this era—is a Roman concept. Supreme power was given to one individual during the time of an intense crisis (usually an invasion, etc.) under the premise that that dictator would give power back at the end. I wanted to observe that process, and I wanted to create a government that revolved around micro-communities under harsh conditions.

Lastly, as a writer, I love a good story of heroism, and so I had tremendous fun borrowing from the Robin





Hood mythology to create Renee—a modern day Robin Hood turned leader of a new nation. And along with my Maid Marian, there are many heroic figures that go to make up a complex story, like Robin Hood’s Merry Men.

#### *What Influenced You While Writing?*

The most striking influence on the book were the favelas of Rio de Janeiro—extremely poor, non-sanctioned, densely-packed ghettos in Rio that have no city services and which are self-governed. Residents get electricity by ‘Gato’-ing (‘cat-ing’), which means they hack into city electricity and run wires directly to their shacks. I spent a little time in a couple of favelas in 2008. While the favelas were impoverished and contained many tragic stories, they were also an inspiration in their independence and resourcefulness, in their fervent community organizations that lobbied against the city for rights and services, and for their inventiveness. They are rife with criminal activity, yes, but many of these criminal bosses, while the source of drugs, also provided other

services: education, protection, food. I loved, for example, seeing the taxi service in one, which consisted of two brothers and a sister each with motorcycles, and behind them a large chalkboard with their rates:

1km / 1 person / 1 Reais

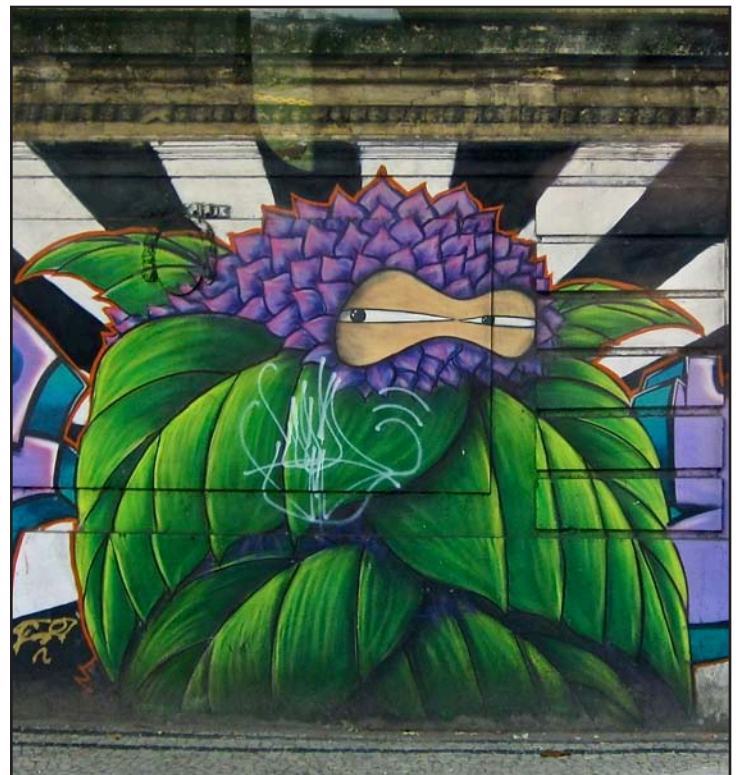
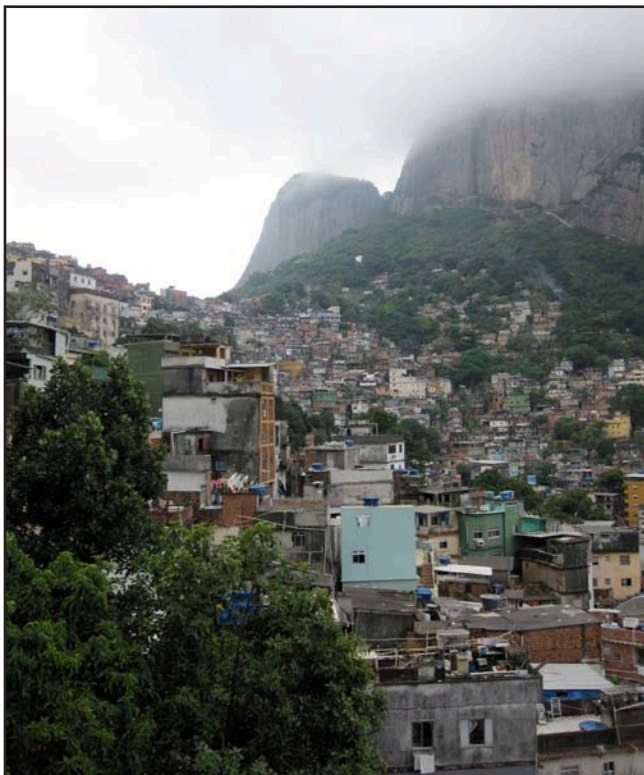
1km / 2 persons / 1.50 Reais

Each favela is essentially an enclave. They operate within the confines of Rio, but entirely under their own rules (anarchy being the starting point, here).

I was also fascinated with re-writing the apocalypse genre in a way I think is a far more likely scenario. There were events that led to the collapse of the Roman Empire—but really, it was a long disintegration. A tremendous decline, that started first with the two parts of it being split (east/west), and each of those parts declining individually.









# An excerpt from Benjamin Parzybok's novel *Sherwood Nation*

## PREFACE

How it happened:

It happened slowly. The fishermen called the rogue and unpredictable changes at sea *El Pescadero*. Winds came from differing directions, currents looped back on themselves, temperatures fluctuated. It wasn't seasonal like El Niño, though at first everyone thought it was. It didn't go away. Governments fought bitterly about whose fault was whose, and who ought to do what about it.

Along with *El Pescadero* came an increase in oceanic salinity. There were lots of theories there. When you swam in the ocean, the new buoyancy was subtle, but pleasurable.

The bone-dry summers of the west lingered deeper and deeper into winter. Everyone could see that the snow pack was melting. When was the snow pack not melting? All you had to do was look up at any of the balding mountains.

Then the great Deschutes River, elegant and fast, a river which cut across the Oregon desert like a streak of lightning across a dull gray sky, dried up in a single summer.

The farms that depended upon it followed suit. There were strikes and protests. Blood was spilled. Then, quickly, other rivers diminished.

Finally, the greatest of them all, the Columbia River, its sources choked in mud, leaked its deathsong through the gorge, and became only a scaly alligator skin of memory. In its wake, valleys turned to deserts, fertile farms to dust, and the great migration East began.

As the hordes of Droudies poured into the Midwest and Eastern United States and the last of the surface water seeped deep into the ground, anger over the millions of incoming refugees escalated. Finally, borders along the Rocky Mountains were sealed to Westerners and a meager aid strategy was conceived by the bankrupt government for the many millions abandoned to their dry fates out west.

## THE DROUGHT

It was morning and the power was not yet on. Zach and Renee lay in the heat of the bed listening to the city wake outside the building's windows.

"We should learn how to rain-dance," Renee said. They were new to the relationship, and she could feel his hesitance to speak, the tentativeness to him, as if she were some toothy, unpredictable animal he'd invited into his house. She pressed her lips into his shoulder and wanted to bite him there. His skin left a taste of salt on her lips.

"Why don't you?" Zach said.

"Nah."

Zach stared at the ceiling, and she stared at him, with his short-cropped head and monkish demeanor, as if he lived his life in servitude to some greater thing, the identity of which she had yet to figure out. "I'm thinking of turning to crime instead."

"You'd be good at it," he said. He was never sure how serious she was. He made two pistols of his hands and *pow-pow*ed the ceiling. "But you'd need a mask and a horse, obviously."

"Mm, spurs."

An eerie *clop clop clop* sounded through the open window and they looked at each other in amazement.

"A horse!" she said. "You're a conjurer!"

But instead it was a big moose that stumbled along the dusty street, its skin tight over its ribs. Its head jerked left and right in anxious, almost animatronic movements.

"Oh no," Renee said, "I fucking hate this. Josh saw a bear two days ago—I told you?"

They watched it continue down the street until a shot rang out. The moose's body jerked and sidestepped strangely and then there was another shot.

"That's a whole shit ton of extra food rations if they can store it," Zach said as they watched men close in on it. "God knows how they'll store it." The moose stumbled again on a third shot but continued on. "They've got to get a straight shot in."

"I can't watch," Renee said. She climbed back in bed and spoke to Zach's shirtless back as he watched the

moose fall and the hunters try to drag the animal to the side of the road. “Hunters in the streets.”

“Dying of thirst has got to be worse,” Zach said.

“What’s happening? Tell me what’s happening.”

“They can’t lift it, one of its legs is kicking.”

“My coworker had to kill his dog,” Zach said. He’s a total mess about it.”

“Seriously? No.”

“He was a big dog. He drank over twenty units a day and was getting aggressive about his share.”

“I don’t buy it,” Renee said. “The moose maybe, but not your own dog. Next is your neighbor, then your children and your wife. It’s like a spider that cuts her own webbing.”

“You think I’m in danger, as his coworker?”

“Oh, you’re in danger alright.”

Zach turned and looked at her and she winked at him. She was naked with the sheet pulled to the top of her thighs. She had unraveled her braids for him the night before, and her hair spilled across her arms and his pillow.

“You’re not watching anymore?” she said.

“No.” He pulled his gallon off the dresser and poured them each a unit, a little less than half a cup. He handed her one and sat on the edge of the bed, placing one hand on her thigh, the heat of it warming his hand through the sheet. He stared into the shallow cup of water and thought of the moose’s stutter-step as it was shot, and wondered if he would know when he was the moose—the animal too lost and thirsty for reason, stumbling toward annihilation.

He was still thirsty after he’d finished. Renee stared into her cup as if awaiting a divination there. It was an effort not to refill his. Rations were two unit gallons per day. His measure of making it: if at the end of the day he had a few units of savings leftover.

He watched her sit up in bed. She divvied her hair into two halves and proceeded to rework each half into long, black braids. He was so taken with her. He wished the job of braiding would never end, so he could keep on watching.

“Come back in here,” she said when she’d finished.

“I’ve got to work,” he said, but made no movement toward it. He was one of the few people he knew who had a job.

“Nah. When the power goes on, we can pretend then. We can go about the day. Until then, let’s be here.”

He stood over the bed indecisively for a moment until she got a crab-claw hold on his wrist and pulled him back in. There was a struggle with the sheet as she worked at getting it flattened out and repositioned over them just so and he held still and grinned as she worried

it. When it was finally to her liking, they lay side by side, the sheet pulled to their chins, and were quiet.

He found her hand under the covers. Next to him was the girl who’d served him coffee at the café down the block for over a year, the one he’d thought about at work, at night, in bed. The one he never got it together enough to approach for more than a cup of coffee. The girl he’d listened to as she talked to customers, weaving in eloquent yarns that inevitably turned to history: the collapse of the Bronze Age, the Mongol empire, the Polish peasant revolt, the Mayan uprising against the Spanish, and with each story he overheard he felt himself able to say less to her, his tongue tangled with awe.

Then two weeks ago the café was shut down and she walked home with him on her last day. At his door, he’d said, “I’d like it if you’d come inside.” He still winced at the blunt, sad honesty of the line. She’d smiled as if it were really that easy and said sure.

She unfolded the corner of the sheet and reached to the bedside table next to her. “I have wet wipes!” she said. She handed him one and took one for herself. Then she submerged under the sheet with it, and he could feel the wet, cleansing and titillating trail she made with it down his chest, and then further. He reached for any part of her, first the back of her neck, then her arm, later her thigh when that surfaced from under the sheet, and then between.

When they finished she squeezed his hand tight and they were silent. After a while she said, “We’re going to do a robbery. Josh and I and a couple others.”

“Black Bloc Josh? From the rezoning riot?” he said. He let go of her hand and crossed his arms over his chest. Josh had been a regular at the café, who with a few others had held regular meetings in which they bitched overmuch about the state of the world, with no small amount of bravado. He sat near them once, listening in, watching Renee among the group. They all seemed hardened. Two men and two women, dirty and browned by sun, lean and fierce-looking. In his mind they were like a tribe of warriors; the men were real men and next to them, Zach felt like a boy. He wasn’t sure what they’d been before: wilderness guides maybe, or labor organizers, or electricians. They certainly hadn’t been ad writers. If he were to be honest, he realized he’d hoped never to hear of them again.

“A truck,” she said. “We won’t take a lot—it’s a message.”

“Renee—please.” He turned and propped himself up on one elbow. “A message?” It was hard to keep the disdain out of his voice.

“It’s not an official distribution truck. They’re driving them up into the West Hills and we followed one. We



want people to know what they're doing."

"I can help you guys send a message. Patel & Grumus is the city's ad firm. I talk to the mayor all the time."

Renee shrugged and smiled and then pulled him to her. "Don't worry, Zach."

With his lips pressed against her neck, their bodies fitting together like two hands clasped, he did just that: worry.

At the doorway to his building, she kissed him goodbye. It was an easy thing, a simple thing. Like husband and wife do, each headed off for their jobs. Him to his, her to the meeting of the water activists.

"Listen, don't," Zach said once more.

"I'll bring you a gallon," she said.

"I don't care about that."

She smiled roguishly and patted his cheek. "Don't you worry about me. I'm invincible," she said and flexed her bicep for him. "Go ahead, feel it."

He did so and nodded glumly. "Impressive. Back in one piece," he said, "or else."

On her bike, though, she felt vulnerable. She rode hard to her apartment. The streets had begun to be unpredictable—moose, yes, but the desperation had led to a steady uptick of violence. She asked herself if she were really going to go through with this, and each time some inner voice, of some stronger substance, piped up that she was.

A few weeks previously she and Josh had tailed the trucks heading into the wealthy West Hills neighborhood. They'd watched as the trucks pulled into the driveways of palatial houses. Drivers hand-delivering gallon after gallon of water. Inside, she'd imagined an opulent matron bathing in a fountain. The image of it needled her for days.

Nearly a year ago, when the tap dried up and water service ceased, the city council created the Portland Water Act, declaring water to be a city-owned resource of which every citizen would get equal distribution. But as far as she could tell, while the rich swam in their fountains, kids in Northeast Portland wandered about in a dehydrated daze, the last of the city's trees died, and moose committed suicide.

Bea was asleep. She edged her roommate's door open and stared in, trying to decide whether to tell her where she was going. Bea looked peaceful in sleep, issuing a soft snore, a sort of gorilla-hum. Her brownish-red hair curled in a knotted mass around her face and her big feet hung over the end of the bed, uncovered. Though it was warm enough, Renee slipped in and quietly tucked the sheet over them.

In her room Renee sat on her bed and rotated her metal unit gallon in her hands, letting the water slosh about inside. She had a little time to kill, but it was the sort of time that could not be used. Time that sent an incapacitating buzz through one's brain, keeping her from performing simple tasks. There was less than a quart left in the container. She took a swig and then confirmed the amount on the digital readout: 6.4 units remained, out of the forty. The city issued the unit gallons, which measured a gallon into forty smaller units, under the premise: *That which is measured, improves*. The expression was affixed to the side via a cheerful green sticker, with a tired-looking smiley face at the end of it. She felt she remembered Zach had had a hand in the campaign.

She wished she could tell her parents. But even if she could find a way to get a call through to the other side of the Rocky Mountains, to whatever humble abode they might be residing in, eking out some living or scraping by on savings in order to buy their daily allotment of alcohol, she thought she knew exactly how the conversation might go:

"Hi Mom, it's Renee."

"Oh!" There would be the sound of a long exhale of smoke, as if her mother had inhaled a dragon's lungful of tobacco before answering the phone. "Renee."

A silence would persist for a few seconds as both considered what they might have to tell each other.

"I went to a water activists meeting, really cool people. We're going to do an action today to make a statement about water issues. I'm going to help stop a contraband truck."

"What?" her mother would say, the English deeply accented by her native Spanish. "What about your degree?"

Her mother always brought up her degree, as if it were a panacea for everything that irked her about her daughter's personality. Renee was the only one in the family to receive one. But to her mother's horror, she'd graduated with a degree in history, or as she'd once called it: *a degree in the dead*.

Then, as she tried to make the water activists sound compelling for her mother, the words would get a little lost in her mouth. The making of her own life interesting to her mother was a task she'd had very little luck with throughout her childhood. The more she explained, the more preposterous it would sound. A noise or two might issue from her mother, indicating her continued, but mostly bored, presence on the end of the line. Renee could see her: in her gray sweatsuit, the phone squeezed between her shoulder and ear, a glass of gin in one hand while with the other she pried off chips of paint from the wall with a long thumbnail. In the background, the



dramatic monotony of Mexican telenovelas. And then her mother would say, by way of ending the conversation: Your father will want to know.

Her father, Renee thought, *would* want to know. She would love to tell him, but there was the difficulty of encountering him in a moment of coherence. When Renee's mother yelled for her father, down several flights

of stairs, he would pick up his phone off the table saw, where it sat in a pile of sawdust and red wine splatter. Her parents undertook their lives on different floors of the house, him in the basement, her on the second floor, each speaking their own accents, Mexican and Polish, each living partly in the worlds from which they'd come, meeting only rarely in the middle for meals or to exit



the house, or most rarely of all, when a sudden berserk passion flared up between them. Around her father were hundreds of dark, metal-worn tools, the signs of a constant, if somewhat ineffectual, tinkerer. In polar opposition to the woman two floors above, he would answer boisterously, sounding thrilled to hear from her, his words slushing from his mouth with great speed, sentences released in one order and then swallowed back and thrust out in a different order. He would listen to her deeply for a minute or two, then list back to her the details, asking questions that she'd answered, as if the conversation were going in reverse. It would make him happy, and then angry on her behalf, and then happy all over again, and then, inevitably, he would gather himself up, swell his lungs for delivery of a monstrous speech about his own comparable moment.

Her father had been a whistleblower. He had outed the Roswell Basin aquifer contamination. This was something he had done, the moment his life had ascended to, and the moment from which his life declined since. She'd listened to this same heady story a hundred times, thrilled, as a child, when the hero in the story, her father, fought and prevailed. He'd gone on the news, he'd testified to Congress, he was backed by scientists, and he'd won. Yet somehow it had ruined him, as if he'd mastered some great game that no one else knew how to play. What was left for him afterwards? What compared to the heroic moment he'd had? He glimpsed, for a moment, ascending permanently out of mediocrity. For the first time he believed in the possibility of being a superman.

In the end, there was no way to contact either one of them.

She was late to the meeting. The water activists were still exotic enough to be a little intimidating, a rough lot with histories of political action and arrests. There were three of them. Josh had recruited her—he was tall and thin and easy in his movement. He smiled her in and gestured for her to sit at the kitchen table, where they'd gathered. In a protest some years back, he had been beaten by the police. The resulting settlement had won him some money and fame. Even how he was dressed, with a dusty bandana around his neck ready to pull up over his nose, a ski cap and an unkempt beard, it was hard not to feel a pull of attraction.

The others at the table, Janey and Davis, were pissed at him for changing plans at “zero hour.”

Renee watched them argue. Josh was the loudest thing in the room, and she wrestled with his simultaneous attractiveness and bull-headedness. He won his

fight because he outlasted everyone else.

“Dude,” Davis said. “What’s a month of planning for if you change the plan on the day of?”

Josh shrugged and smiled broadly. “Because it’s a better plan? What’s a brain for if you can’t adapt to a better outcome now and then?”

They were all nervous, and every time she became conscious of her own breath she had to work to slow it down again. She wished they could leave now. She wondered if this is what it felt like before battle, if her father had felt this way. There was a vibration in her guts that would not stop. To do something with her hands, she pulled a piece of scratch paper from the center of the table and folded it into a paper boat.

While Davis and Josh argued, Janey poured Renee a shot glass of water from her own unit gallon. “Ready?”

Renee sailed her boat across the table and left it in front of Janey. She had been asked this often but did not blame them. She was the newest and least experienced, the potential weak link. But Renee could feel her readiness, a coiled spring of it.

“She was born ready,” Josh snapped. “I picked her, I know what I’m doing.”

Renee frowned and shrugged. “Think so,” she said. “Yes I am.”

Janey squeezed her arm. “Good. You’re pretty key, here.”

Davis waved his hand in Josh’s direction to end their argument. “We’ll see who’s right in the outcome, friend.” He looked about at Janey and Renee. “KATU news knows to be there,” he said. “Everybody have their flyers?”

Renee pulled a hand-printed flyer from the center of the table. It read:

### **WHO ARE THE THIEVES?**

This truck carries unmarked  
water to the West Hills!  
The Portland Water Act is a sham!

She thought Josh must have written it; a wordsmith he was not.

He pointed at her. “Speak through your part again.”

She clutched the flyer, closed her eyes, and narrated her way through each action. As she did, she visualized it, every minute detail. She had practiced it constantly. It was automatic.

He nodded when she was done. “That was perfect,” he said.



## Reviews & Reader Reactions to *Sherwood Nation*

“In the near future, a drought-stricken Portland, Oregon struggles to survive. Meanwhile, a new populist nation arises from within, led by an unlikely barista heroine. *Sherwood Nation* is realistic sci fi that is sometimes disturbingly far too real. An original, thought-provoking and highly entertaining read.”

—William, the Duck Store, Eugene, OR

“*Sherwood Nation* seems like a particularly timely novel. . . . a perpetual college student/barista, Renee, angry that the rich areas of Portland appear to be getting extra water deliveries, steals a government water truck with some fellow activists to bring the precious liquid to the poor. Caught in action by a TV crew, Renee is dubbed ‘Maid Marian’ by the media, and her Robin Hood-esque scheme becomes a big story.”—*Daily Hampshire Gazette*

“An excellent depiction of what could be, especially in regards to the droughts that the western part of the United States experiences with regularity. The characters were vibrant and leapt off the pages, demanding to be heard. Yeah, highly recommended.”—Sapphoq Reviews

“Rich with haunting descriptions of a place once wild and now starved and poignant human dilemmas of basic survival, *Sherwood Nation* is a manifesto on how communities can work together to improve the greater good that does not shy from, sugarcoat, or exaggerate the corruptions of power and outcomes of rebellion. For a political treatise set in an imaginable apocalypse, Parzybok’s second novel is refreshing in its lack of heavy-handed allegory or pedantic utopian preaching. Maid Marian reaches beyond herself to create peace and solidarity in hopeless times. Threatened, others desire her demise and position. It is a clever, if cautionary tale.”

—*Electric Literature*

“Set in Portland Oregon after a massive drought has crippled American society west of the Mississippi, *Sherwood Nation* is a different kind of dystopian novel. No magic. No zombies. No tyrannical overlords ruling with iron fists and tournaments. It brings a fascinating realism to the genre, creating a uniquely human and tangible version of the apocalypse story. *Sherwood Nation* is about real people grappling with an all too real catastrophe in ways that reveal aspects of our culture today,

while exploring the best, worst, and, most importantly, the vague middle between the two ideals, of what we could be.”—Josh Cook, Porter Square Books (interview)

“Parzybok’s achievements are manifold here. First, he tells a gripping story whose lineaments are never predictable. There are great suspenseful set pieces, like the theft of a water truck and a shootout in *Sherwood*. The entire action is compressed into about two weeks or so, but feels like a whole saga: birth, maturity, and death of a kingdom.”—*Locus*

“A group of idealists, led by a charismatic young woman, struggle to remake society in postapocalyptic Portland, Ore.”—*Shelf Awareness*

“Left me with memorable images that will, no doubt, be triggered over time. There’s something heavy real in its imaginings—something that almost compels me to pray for rain.”—NW Book Lovers

“The gritty world in *Sherwood Nation* and the circumstances that changed a former barista into a figure of hope is a story that focuses more on the consequences of disaster rather than the disaster itself.”—Geeky Library

“I finished Parzybok’s book not really feeling as though I’d read a work of fiction but more like a finely orchestrated prophecy with believable characters and likely scenarios. I certainly haven’t looked at water the same way and probably won’t ever again. Read Parzybok’s novel and prepare for battle. We have been duly notified.”

—*New Pages*

“With climate change and ever-increasing consumption, running out of water is a danger we don’t readily acknowledge, yet Benjamin Parzybok’s *Sherwood Nation* makes that danger vividly real. . . . Here we see how people behave in crisis—some better and some worse—and how idealism, self-concerned realism, and the personal hang in a balance; friends, alliances, and enemies are made, and, most effectively, Renee’s boyfriend, Zach, and Renee herself grow (and glow) as things get tough. Ben, who’s Portland-based, is the creator or co-creator of numerous projects, including Gumball Poetry and the Black Magic Insurance Agency, a city-wide, one night alternate reality game, so he knows about building community. He’s done a great job here, but let’s hope the richly detailed “*Sherwood Nation*” never really has to come to be.”—*Library Journal*

“Parzybok is riffing on the Robin Hood story, to be



sure, but he also layers on some astute social and political commentary, and he's built a fully functioning and believable future world. Give this one to fans of Adam Sternbergh's *Shovel Ready*."—*Booklist*

"Benjamin Parzybok is one of our most imaginative literary inventors. In *Sherwood Nation* he gives us a vision of Portland's rebellious indie spirit that goes deeper than the usual caricatures, revealing a city alive with conflict and possibility. This is playful, serious, and profoundly humanizing art."

—Ryan Boudinot (*Blueprints of the Afterlife*)

"Benjamin Parzybok has reached into the post-collapse era for a story vital to our here and now. *Sherwood Nation* is part political thriller, part social fable, and part manifesto, its every page brimming with gonzo exuberance."—Jedediah Berry (*The Manual of Detection*)

"Parzybok does this thing where you think, 'this is fun!' and then you are charmed, saddened, and finally changed by what you have read. It's like jujitsu storytelling."—Maureen F. McHugh (*After the Apocalypse*)

"Portland is a rare outpost, with a semi-functional municipality, but the burdens of relentless rationing and an increasingly apparent division between those who go thirsty and those who do not, make for prime tinder. It takes just one minor act of symbolic monkey wrenching to set this tale ablaze. *Couch* has remained in my consciousness because it goes "out there" to find its core (think Douglas Adams, Tom Robbins, Gabriel Garcia Marquez). What makes *Sherwood* so compelling and, frankly, often terrifying, is how close to home it lives. This Portland is totally familiar, invoking the attitudes and spirit of today's residents and details from the recent political landscape. It feels like the place we know—until a nightly power blackout or parade of National Guard water distribution tankers jars us with a reminder that this is, thankfully, a work of very good fiction."

—*Register Guard*

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