Interview with Charles Baxter, author of *The Sun Collective*

James McDonald
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The WSWS recently spoke to novelist Charles Baxter, author of *The Sun Collective* and other works.

James McDonald: Welcome, Charlie. How are you in this interesting time we're living in?

Charles Baxter: Well, I feel that I'm in a period of radical suspension. We're all waiting for the end of the pandemic; a lot of us are waiting for our chance to be vaccinated. We're waiting for the end of the administration of the current occupant of the White House. And, I don't know … I think in a larger sense we're all waiting for a return to, if not ordinary life, to something like realism, like a life in which you can make plans based on what you have experienced in the past and what you think is going to happen in the future. And we're all waiting for that.

JM: You're waiting for a return to realism. That's something that a couple of characters in *The Sun Collective* mention, that they miss realism. I would like to hear what you have to say about realism, in the novel and in our time.

CB: The novel's technique begins more or less in realism but goes off into a much more dreamlike—almost wonderland—form of narrative. The experience that many of us have had for the last four years, and maybe longer than that, is that reality has started to seem somewhat hallucinatory. I think this happens when consistency and norms begin to go out the window, and common sense, such as it is, if there is such a thing, no longer applies to day-to-day life.

Now if I can turn this state of affairs into a sort of literary direction, I'd say that realism in fiction probably works as a mode when the majority of readers more or less agree on what reality is—the laws that govern the way people behave, the predictability of certain kinds of conventions. When people don't agree about what reality is anymore, then I think realism as a fictional form probably isn't going to work very well. It's going to seem too lukewarm, too flat, and somehow insensitive to the way people actually feel.

So when I was writing the novel, among the models I had were Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, which is in one sense about World War II, but is more particularly about the craziness of certain kinds of warfare. And two Russian novels that have meant a lot to me. One is Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, which has in it a speaking cat who's a dead shot with a Browning automatic. The cat is named Behemoth, and I just imported Behemoth into my novel although my Behemoth does not carry around a Browning automatic. And the other Russian novel is not as well known. It's by Andre Bely, and it's called *Petersburg* and is a hallucinated novel about a person who's in a revolutionary cell, and there's a bomb ticking most of the way through that book. So those were some of my models. This is a long way around answering your question about why I just get very impatient with realism these days.

JM: I've been wondering whether Shakespeare was on your mind as you wrote *The Sun Collective*. There are echoes of *King Lear*, I think, with Ludlow and Timothy as a sort of Edmund and Edgar. And there is a blinding that sort of joins them.

CB: Yeah, that's almost as much *Oedipus Rex* as it is *King Lear*. Here in Minneapolis I saw three Shakespeare plays fairly quickly in row: *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. And what I noticed about these plays is that one of the devices that Shakespeare uses to get his plays going is what I would call a "request moment." The ghost of Hamlet's father appears and has a threefold request for his son to kill King Claudius, to honor his mother and to remember him. King Lear makes a request of his daughters, and Lady Macbeth

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makes a kind of request of Macbeth. And so my novel and a lot of the narrative pivots in it come out of requests. The first chapter has this odd person appearing on the Minneapolis light rail who has two requests of Brettigan, the main character.

And all the way through the novel, characters are making requests of this kind to each other. So it's not exactly stolen from Shakespeare, but it's a dramatic device I noticed and something I felt I could use in my own work. Besides, it's what people do to, and with, each other.

JM: I'm thinking of the scene where Harry Brettigan is shaving before the dinner party, and he imagines he wants to speak to his father's ghost.

CB: That's right. And that part of the novel is autobiographical. I never knew my father. He died when I was 18 months old, and during much of my life I've carried on a sort of quiet one-way discussion with my father: What would you have thought of this? What was it like when you were alive? And you know Shakespeare is intensely interested in these sorts of moments, when you're speaking to your memory of or what remains of your father. And so I don't know if I was plugging into that, but it certainly is a part of the novel. As is the history of Minneapolis.

JC: That's where you bring in the 1934 general strike, which was led by Trotskyists as you mention in the novel.

CB: Absolutely right.

JM: So we are, the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party, the direct heirs of that history and that heritage.

CB: Yeah, there was a large, a very large, following of Trotsky here in Minneapolis, particularly in the truckers union. Things were very volatile in those days. A fascist group in the Twin Cities, the Silver Shirts, was also there, and there was fighting in the streets. And it's a long story, but if you're a Democrat in Minnesota, you're not just a member of the Democratic Party, you're a member of the Democratic Farmer Labor Party, the DFL. It's a kind of remnant of some of the radical action that was the case here in the 1920s, '30s and early '40s.

JM: And there's another echo of American labor history in Ludlow himself, in his name. Christina says, as she introduces him to the Brettigans, that he's named after the Luddites. But, of course, also he has named himself—he names himself after the Ludlow Massacre of 1914.

CB: That's right. The massacre is never mentioned in the novel, but for people who know about it, it's there.

JM: One of the dichotomies, or maybe it's just a relationship, in the novel is that between individual conduct and organized political action in order to bring about social or political change. Every character in the novel in their own way is groping for something to do, and it feels like you as the author are urgently working toward some sort of approach to this present moment, some way of addressing it.

CB: I think that social action without a group response tends very quickly to fragment and to become, not useless, but—the adjective that's coming to mind is *troubled*. … What I thought for this book was that I wanted to have a group that is undeniably doing good things. They have a co-op, they have a free store, they're helping rehabilitate drug addicts. Everything we learn about them that they're actually doing is useful for the community, and they're doing it as a group. But you can't write a novel in which everybody is working perfectly well, and things are all improving. That's not a story. Stories begin when things start to go wrong, and I thought that given who Ludlow was, and who we find him out to be, that something dangerous would come of this.

I think the problem that all of us have in America is this feeling of atomization, that so many of us feel that we are alone all the time and that there are no really good ways of applying our best intentions, our best thoughts, our best actions in a group. … What I wanted to write was a novel that was both funny and slightly dreamlike but which gave a sense of what we're all up against.

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