

# WELLS TOWER

Wells Tower is a writer living in New York City. His first collection of short stories, *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* was released by FSG on March 17<sup>th</sup>. Will Guzzardi and Will Litton spoke with Tower at a little Greek joint in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

***Will Guzzardi, Wag's Revue: It's possible that some of our readers aren't familiar with your name, so the first question will also be kind of a mini bio of you.***

**Wells Tower: Sure.**

***WG: So according to my cursory internet research, you were published in the Paris Review, in November of 2001. Was that your first—***

**WT: Yeah, that was my first fiction publication.**

***WG: And that was your story "Down to the Valley." You were an MFA student at Columbia at the time. Since then you've been published all over the place—travel writing in The New York Times, in Outside Magazine; nonfiction in Harper's, The Washington Post; fiction in The New Yorker and McSweeney's. You even had a hardware review in The Believer, if I'm not mistaken.***

**WT: Yeah, yeah, I did—the stud finder. I remember it well.**

***WG: My question is: do you feel like you've made it as a writer at this point? And if so, was there a moment, one moment of these laurels in particular that made you feel like, 'Man, I've really made it now'?***

WT: No, I think this—the idea of ‘making it’—I think that only happens when you’re just getting started. The *Paris Review* publication was kind of incredible for me. When I was first going to Columbia, the first two short stories I wrote—which were basically the first two fully-fledged pieces of short fiction that I’d ever put the final period on—I just sent into the *Paris Review*’s slush pile.

Actually, I’d had an agent. I’d done a piece—my first piece of serious nonfiction—for the *Washington Post Magazine*, where I’d went and got a job at a traveling carnival, traveled around as a carnie for a week, and wrote a piece of nonfiction about it. After that some New York agent got in touch with me, and that felt awfully special—that I had this agent and everything. That happened really early on. I sent her my first two stories from the Columbia fiction workshop and she basically said, ‘I’m not interested in sending these out.’

So I sent them to the *Paris Review* myself, and they picked them out of the slush pile. I don’t think I quite knew what a weird deal that was. Just the other day I was looking at their website and they were talking about how they get fifteen to twenty thousand unsolicited manuscripts a year. It’s just this huge sea of manila envelopes. Anyway, they took the first two stories. When they called me to tell me they’d accepted them, they put me right on the phone to George Plimpton, who’d always been a huge hero of mine, and I thought, ‘I can’t believe this. This is absolutely amazing. I’ve made it.’ I made five hundred bucks or something for selling the story.

But then, everything, the rest of the career stuff happened so slowly. I had a contract with the *Washington Post Sunday Magazine* for years, where I would do three cover stories a year for them. The first time I did a cover for them I thought, ‘Wow,

I've made it.' But then I realized, 'You didn't make it, you just made it to another not extremely important tier of the ziggurat of getting your work out there.' And so it—I don't know—it all happened so slowly. I've got this book coming out, but it's literally nine years of short stories. It's this crazy grab bag of pieces of fiction I've worked on over the years.

For me 'making it,' I guess, would be getting to a place where I feel like I'm consistently writing things that I feel really, really happy about. And I don't think that's ever going to happen. It certainly hasn't happened yet. The moments of joy in writing are so fleeting. You might write a sentence you're pleased with or a scene you're happy about and you feel happy for the rest of the afternoon, and then when you sit down the next morning to work on it, you're like, 'This is just cold pudding. It's just terrible.' I don't know what making it would be. I think if I were a lot better and a lot smarter and were writing things that constantly were astounding me, that would feel like making it. But it's work, it's just work. It's always just work.

*Will Litton, Wag's Revue: You mentioned your stint as a carnie. My first encounter with your fiction was the Harper's piece "On the Show"—a terrific short story about a twenty-one year old guy who runs off to work at the fair. Was that inspired by the—*

**'You might write a sentence you like, and the next morning you're like, "This is just cold pudding. It's just terrible."'**

WT: Yeah, that was directly inspired by that. Essentially, I spent a week doing this crazy thing at the carnival. It was funny, I'd pitched this story—well, let me back up to some bio stuff to preface all this. I grew up in Chapel Hill. Then I went to college at Wesleyan.

After that I moved to the West Coast, to Portland, Oregon, where I had a bunch of awful right-out-of-college sort of jobs.

I had a data entry gig, which was so unbelievably dehumanizing. I just had huge stacks of invoices with obscure numbers that corresponded to obscure electronics parts. Even if they'd describe the electronics parts with actual language instead of numbers, I still would have had no idea what I was keying into the computer. It was me and my boss, who was this kind of satanic woman with oversized sweaters and stirrup pants. She was just constantly cracking the whip on me. I could never enter enough invoices to make her happy. It was terrible.

So anyway, I was doing that, then I had some warehouse gigs, and then I moved back to North Carolina when I was twenty-two or twenty-three, and I started doing a little pick-up work for the independent weekly. Whatever I could write, whatever assignments they were willing to give me, I would do. I was doing restaurant stuff and just anything.

The only real game in town at the point was *Doubletake* magazine. So I went over there and just said, 'whatever job you're willing to give me I will take that job.' And that job was basically the night watchman job. I would go over there at six o'clock and hang around and wait until everybody left the building and then lock up and set the alarm and that was my deal there. Then I managed to start writing some press releases for them, and somehow got a gig running their website.

Then, when the magazine fell apart, my boss there went and got a job at *Washington Post Magazine*. So I pitched him this story to go travel with the carnival. And the pitch was that, you know, carnies were this misunderstood class, that everybody thought that they were these lawless gypsies, crackheads, murderers

and that sort of thing. And I was going to do this undercover thing where I would get a job in the carnival and penetrate all of those stereotypes.

Well, I got the job and immediately discovered that all of those stereotypes were totally, one hundred percent spot-on. I didn't meet anyone who hadn't done extensive prison time. It was kind of a scary experience. So I got out of there. It was a good journalistic boot camp, though, just because it really trained me how to observe things. Your powers of observation are much keener and more finely tuned when you're scared for your own hide. I couldn't actually take notes in front of the guys I was working with, so I'd do these little mnemonics. Something would happen and I'd think of how I'd want to describe it and I'd concoct this paragraph in my mind and just repeat it to myself enough so that I could jot it down when I'd get on break. Then I'd go running off to the port-a-john and try to write the thing down.

Anyway, I got out of that thing with 20,000 words of notes. And most of my notes were in a more polished and linear form than my nonfiction notes tend to be these days. I really wrote the notes as a story. It was easier to do because it was basically memoir. I basically just charted the arc of my experience that week. The *Post* piece ran at 5,000 words so I had all of this extra stuff, all of these sorts of cutting room floor goodies, that I had really wanted to put to better use. So the carnie fiction story was basically just a way to use those things that were very dear to me as nonfiction leavings.

I'm not nearly so precious about it now. Since that was my first story it was really painful to have stuff cut. I wasn't used to having things cut. But now when I sit down to do a piece of nonfiction I can pretty much assume straight off the top that the

things I love most will be the first things to fall under the axe.

**WL:** *Several moments of dialogue in “On the Show” are just absolutely hilarious. Here’s my favorite line right here:*

“Would you?” Ellis asks me, nodding at the woman.

“Yes,” I say.

“God if I wouldn’t,” says Ellis. “I’d eat her whole damn child just to taste the thing he squeezed out of.”

**WT:** **Oh right, that line. That I did not hear while I was doing that job. I heard that from a friend who worked on a fishing boat. But the line—if you’ll pardon me—that he heard from one of his coworkers was, ‘I’d drink a gallon of her piss just to see where it ran out of,’ or something like that.**

But yeah, I think that those sorts of dialogue tics and things like that—maybe people from all over the country get excited about that sort of thing—but I think that might be one kind of enthusiasm that comes from growing up in the South. You know, having those terrible summer jobs, laying brick or carrying concrete, and you’re working with these guys from the outer counties who probably dropped out of school in sixth grade, but have this incredible raconteurial style and great, great natural poetics.

**WG:** *I wanted to go to nonfiction for a quick second. One of the pieces that, as far as I could tell, really helped put you on the map was “Bird-Dogging the Bush Vote” in Harpers. That was published in 2005 but it’s about your time, undercover again, volunteering with the Bush campaign in Florida in 2004. So, I have a couple of questions about it. First of all, you express some guilt in the essay about winning votes for the other team. Have you done anything to expurgate yourself?*

**WT:** To atone for that? Well, to be totally honest—I don't know if this should be off the record or not—I think I did more harm to the campaign than good when I was down there. I was actually sort of scuttling their phone lists and things like that. I was having to do a lot of phone banking and they'd give me a huge stack of numbers and I'd basically pretend to call 80% of them. What have I done? I don't think I really have. I did a fair amount of volunteering for Barack in this last year.

**WG:** *You were writing it at a time when it really seemed like the energy, the political momentum, was with the conservative movement in this country. And it seemed like we the liberals were kind of lost in the trees, and the future of America was on the right. And it's the same feeling you have in "The Kids Are Far Right" where you go to the national conservative student conference in 2006. It's fascinating to me how much that narrative has flipped in these three or four years since that. Do you think this is a real change afoot in the American political climate, or is it just Obama? What's going to happen to all those kids who you met?*

**WT:** Those two pieces actually capture pretty different political moments. With the "Bird-Dogging" piece, it was actually kind of incredible to me that it got the attention that it did, and even that it got published, seeing as the emotional core of the story was really one of horror and disgust and personal terror. It was similar to the carnie story in that way. I guess it was a portrait of the Boschian landscape of Florida in 2004 and just how crazily polarized we all were.

Going to the John Kerry rally with Bush hecklers was amazing, because the left was just as horrific and just as vile as we'd like to think the Republicans are. We were spit on and cussed at, and there was this outpouring of hatred and invective. We had no

greater claims to grace than the right did, barring the fact that we hadn't been in power and actively destroying the country for four years at that point.

The thing that was incredible about that moment was that people didn't seem to be able to articulate why they liked George Bush. Somehow at all of these rallies that I went to, the dominant rhetorical attack with Bush, with all of Bush's acolytes—I think I saw him appear a couple of times during the reporting of that story—the dominant rhetorical strategy was, 'John Kerry and Osama bin Laden are the same person and they both want to kill as many of your children as possible.'

And we were still under the spell of 9/11. Nobody who I was spending time with really made a case for why Bush was a good president or why he was going to run the country well. It was that terrorist mumbo-jumbo and the nonsense about gay marriage and abortion—which were these empty vessels that nobody cared about—that they could pour their sympathies with the Right and their culture war animosities into.

Then in 2006 I went and spent a week with these young Republicans at the Young Americas Foundation conference in Washington. And the thing that was really intriguing there was that, at that point, the Bush administration was in flames. It was pretty clear that the historical verdict on Bush's presidency was that it had been a certified disaster. So the thing that was really intriguing was that I couldn't find a single kid—or maybe one out of five, six hundred kids—who'd admit to being a Republican. They'd all admit to being conservatives. They really wanted to get back to the Goldwater-style conservatism that Bush had basically run rough-shod over. George Bush destroyed the Republican brand, and for them to come back it's going to take a whole lot of work to reinvent themselves. And the thing that was



stunning about John McCain's campaign was that he tried to do the same old garbage, you know: 'Obama's a terrorist, he's got this thing with Bill Ayers, they're terrorists.' And it just didn't really work. You just can't pull that same stupid hustle forever.

**WG:** *You mentioned 9/11 just then, in terms of the spell that it had cast on us at that time. You mentioned it also briefly in passing in "Bird-Dogging." It's a real—it's a kind of a harrowing moment in that story. You describe being here in downtown Manhattan on September 11th. After you got out of school when you finished at Columbia, from what I can gather, you lived all over the country. What brought you back to New York and how do you carry that experience?*

**WT:** The 9/11 thing? It's a very, very strange kind of memory for anybody who was here on that day. I was living in the West Village on Carmine Street and 7th Avenue, so my window gave

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onto the towers. And I was just coming back from the coffee shop on my street and I saw that the first plane had hit, and I guess we all thought it was a news copter or something. I called a friend of mine

who was a photographer who lived right around the corner and said, 'Hey this thing happened, maybe we should go check it out,' not knowing what had gone on.

We got pretty far south. I think we got down a little bit past, or right around Battery Park City, and it was slowly dawning. At some point the second plane had hit and then it seemed clear that it was a terrorist attack. And then we, you know, we were

close enough to see people jumping out of the towers. It was this moment where, I mean there's nothing like that kind of horror, that you're a witness to mass murder. There's nothing in our, in my lifetime, as a middle-class American, that can approximate the experience of seeing that.

And so we both, actually it was interesting, we both burst into tears, this friend and I, and we hugged each other and then almost immediately—because this is a guy that I don't have a very huggy relationship with—almost immediately the awkwardness of the embrace trumped the hideousness of the moment.

Then, right at the moment the first tower fell, it was really scary because we got that sort of parallax thing, where it would look like there was only one tower when there were actually two. So we didn't think it was the tower falling, we thought it was some other building just because there was dust all over the place, there was noise, and we started running. It was just this terrible, terrible day. We were both in hysterics all day, like most people, and it was an experience of profound personal horror.

The thing that was interesting was how quickly the personal quality of being there got subsumed by the generic sensation of “being part of history.” It just became this thing that you say, ‘Oh yeah I was in New York on 9/11,’ like, ‘Oh, I was at Woodstock.’ And whatever 9/11 meant in a personal sense quickly became an emblem of this pivot point in history that is kind of hard to have any personal purchase on. I mean, to even say ‘Oh, I was in New York on 9/11’—there's something that feels really kind of gross and stupid about that. As if you're bragging about having seen the Beatles' last show.

**WG:** *You also have a personal connection to the other great domestic tragedy of my lifetime, which is Hurricane Katrina,*