

ALEXANDER BOLDIZAR

ESCALATIONS



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"As a kid, I loved learning languages. I felt like I was a different person in each language, my brain was a little different in each, but gradually that became a focus on English. Now I speak English better than Slovak – except for poetry. I still can't write poetry in English. The lyrical aspects of language are picked up by the time you're three or four years old, so even though there are lots of great authors who write in second or third languages, there are very few poets that do so. There are exceptions, like Rilke, but even with Rilke the French stuff is not as good as the German.

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Harvard Law Record and became the chief editorial columnist. There, I played with form a lot. Every column was different. Even though it was a law school paper, I would write one purely in haiku, I tried writing one as Dr. Seuss... that's when I realized I couldn't write poetry, by subjecting my classmates to it.

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"At the same time, in law school, I was dating the smartest person I've ever met – she was a professor, getting a second doctorate in law. She'd been a professor of philosophy in Finland, and she exposed me to a lot of philosophy. I ended up writing two legal articles with her, in the *European Journal of International Law* on the ethics of nuclear weapons, and stuff like that, which could have served as a thesis. When the time came to write my own thesis, I had no interest in writing yet another analytic law school paper. There was a professor, the only non-lawyer at Harvard Law, Professor Alan Stone. He was the former president of the American Psychiatric Association, and he taught a law and literature class. I asked him, 'Can you be my thesis advisor?' I don't want to write an analytic paper; I want to write a novel that critiques the whole concept of law.' And in order to critique the analytic language of law, I needed to get outside that structure, outside the 'nomological circle' as they call it, and the only way to get outside was to write a novel.

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"I did have to work on my craft. I tried taking a writing class at Harvard, and they wouldn't let me. So I took one at MIT. Actually, the only official writing class I ever took was with Anita Desai at MIT. I found MIT students a lot more fun. They embrace their weirdness. I used what I learned there in *The Ugly*.

"I ended up going to Bread Loaf Writer's Conference twice: the first time, as an attendee, and second time as a waiter – I'm not sure how familiar you are with Bread Loaf, but if you get a scholarship the trade-off is you have to work as a waiter. So it's a nice flip where the most prestigious level is the waiters, and people are not nasty to the waitstaff. You don't sleep much during those ten-day conferences. The first chapter of *The Ugly* was nominated for The Best New American Voices Anthology, and at the last minute they realized I'm not American, so I was bumped off. Each MFA program, including Bread Loaf, can nominate one story, and Bread Loaf nominated mine. That was the closest I came to an MFA.

"I was only a lawyer for 11 months. From the day I quit, I never had to melt another candle. As a 'recovering attorney,' I've done a lot of paid writing: journalism, art criticism, ghostwriting for people

for different lengths of time. Some people will go with him until the end, and some will start to get turned off by how extreme his actions become. That was very conscious. Not exactly a game, but I wanted to keep that open so readers could plug in their own morality and experiences. It's been fascinating hearing the range of responses. People who are parents, for example, tend to sympathize with him much further than people who aren't.

"The two-line synopsis would be that Preble Jefferson can see five seconds into the future, and when government agencies become aware of this skill, they go after him, and then eventually his family. And he'll go to any lengths to protect his family. The book just escalates, with no off-ramps.

"One thing I'll add about this idea of how far readers will travel with him morally – I can't go into too many details, but I've been talking to movie people, and they say they need to change the ending, and I completely understand why. In fiction, you can enter a character from the inside, and you can understand their motivations in a way that just isn't possible in a movie format. I was thinking a lot about that distinction between movies and novels as an art form: that incredible power of fiction to see people's worldviews and life philosophies and histories and identity, and everything else that makes up a human being, and really see it from the inside-out. You can never

out. That's all accurate science, and I extrapolated that predictive processing into Preble's precognitive ability.

"One fun byproduct has been that *The Man Who Saw Seconds* built relationships with neuroscientists in the same way that *The Ugly* built them with philosophers. I did a 'science meets science fiction' reading at Vroman's Bookstore in LA with Dr. Galen Buckwalter, the scientific founder of eHarmony. If I had to pick one 'world's most interesting man,' I'd pick Galen. He now has four implanted brain-computer interface ports, including the first-ever port in his neocortex, far more advanced than Neuralink. He can make music with pure thoughts and incorporates them into his punk band, Siggy. I think their neuronal song is called 'Wirehead.'

"I wanted to get the science as accurate as I could before taking that leap out to extrapolating something impossible – actually seeing the future – and put a lot of research into neuroscience and physics. I used Dr. Karl Friston's Free Energy Principle and Active Inference Models. Galen is actually a co-author with Friston, and I was citing his research partner in the book. How cool is that? That a book can help you build relationships with the scientists you're quoting? When I go to LA now, I stay at Galen's house and we spend hours and days talking about interesting things. That's the

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on Wall Street. When you do that, you start to prioritize clarity. My writing style is simple. I love Kafka, who is famous for stark, clean writing, with very few decorative flourishes at the sentence level. The interesting stuff happens in the juxtaposition of ideas and existential undertones, not in the linguistic beauty. So my writing is not beautiful. My focus is really on clashing ideas against each other in interesting ways. Once again, I can't write poetry; I don't write beautiful sentences.

"However, I do focus on ideas, and having such a strange background is good for that. As I said, I worked as an art critic for a while. If you look at Rembrandt, for example, the stuff that survived the test of time is his later work, which had very open brushstrokes. His contemporaries hated his later work: *The Jewish Bride*, *The Syndics*, *Bathsheba*. They called it 'coarse' and preferred his earlier, polished stuff. But these are the paintings that became famous, because of that opening up – that's the way art people usually frame it, the opening up of the brushstrokes allowed the viewer in.

"I try very hard when I'm writing, when I'm clashing ideas, to do the same. To never lecture, never tell the reader what to think, which ideas should win, just to frame questions in interesting ways. In *The Man Who Saw Seconds*, without giving too many spoilers, as my main character Preble is forced to defend his family, he has to take more and more extreme steps, and he becomes more and more of a monster as he fights monsters. Different readers will track with Preble

match that in a movie.

"My son loves reading non-fiction but doesn't read a lot of fiction. I've told him, 'With non-fiction you're learning hard stuff, but you're not learning the soft stuff that is really important.' I do think our world is, to some extent, moving away from long-form fiction, and I think that's a huge loss in being able to understand each other.

"Still, there's a lot of real science in the science fiction that helped shape the origins of the book. When I was a critic, I wrote for *C-Arts Magazine* – it's gone under since. I had a monthly column about art and culture, with complete creative freedom, and I ended up doing a lot of research for articles on how the brain sees. Initially, it was about seeing art – for example, Ingmar Bergman has this famous quote where he says that he's guilty of deceit, that in an hour-long film there are 27 minutes of complete darkness, of space between film frames. I ended up thinking a lot about how the brain works in terms of understanding art: piecing together narrative, how much we lie, how much our brains lie to us in order to make sense of the world, and the whole idea that we have as many signals going from the brain to our eyes as we do from our eyes to our brain, because we're constantly predicting what will happen next. That's not science fiction, that's actual science. When you catch a ball, you're not really reacting to where the ball is, you're predicting the trajectory of the ball. It takes half a second for the brain to get the signal 'the ball is coming' and tell the arm to reach

most rewarding part for me, as an author, building these incredible relationships.

"I worried I couldn't go that far with the science in the book, that I'd have to tone it down. A friend who's a retired literary agent told me that if I'd been with a bigger publisher they probably would've edited down that science chapter. But I'm happy I kept it, and I think sci-fi is open to it. I always thought, 'This is sci-fi,' though my publisher initially thought of it as a thriller. I did a reading at Third Place books in Seattle, and in the middle of my reading they moved it from the thriller section to the sci-fi section. The bookstores were torn, as well!

"There are different ways you can think about seeing the future. In *Seconds*, it's not just seeing what's coming, but rather seeing all possible futures five seconds ahead. It's basically a smeared-out present. Whereas most of us – or all of us – have a present that's a single point where future turns into past, for Preble, that single point was an open five-second window. That gave him an ability to select from an infinite number of futures. I never explicitly use the word 'multiverse,' but his brain processes a smeared-out present where he can select from multiple paths. He's consistently able to choose the outcome that he wants.

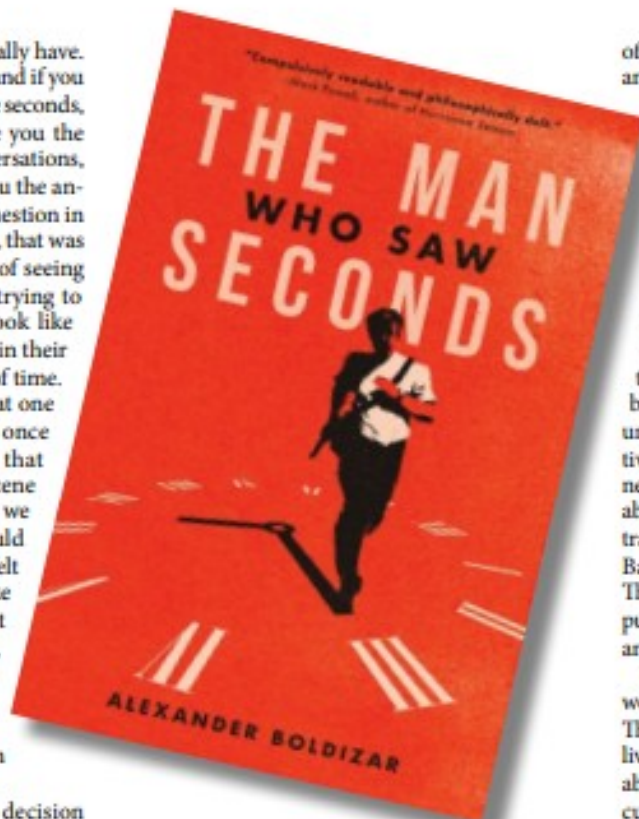
"It was fun taking the slimmest superpower that I could imagine would give him a fighting chance against the institutional power of all the three-letter agencies, and then let them battle it out. But then I also wanted to play with how much

impact that slim superpower could actually have. Say there's a combination lock on a safe, and if you can punch that combination in within five seconds, you know which combination will give you the right outcome. Same with guiding conversations, to the extent that five seconds can get you the answer that you need, you can frame the question in the right way to get the outcome. For me, that was fun; again, that comes back to this idea of seeing different personalities from the inside: trying to conceptualize what the world would look like for somebody who is so essentially alien in their perception of time, or their experience of time.

"That's why I deliberately threw in that one scene with the bear — besides having once wrestled a bear and wanting to plug that experience in somewhere — but the scene where he lost his precog ability, where we could experience what our reality would look like from his perspective. And it felt jagged. Our world feels really jagged, like the present's been shattered. Things just happen unexpectedly. Whereas, for him, he has that smeared-out window, and it was a lot of fun to play with this completely alien worldview. I want to write a space opera one day just to explore alien ways of processing reality.

"Five seconds was a very calibrated decision because there've been a lot of precognition stories that let people look ahead much longer. 'The Golden Man' is the best example, from Philip K. Dick, but his protagonist can see much further and can't deviate from his path. Hollywood changed that in their film adaptation *Next*; they limited Nicolas Cage's precognition to two minutes, except for one full day for events that had to do with the Jessica Biel character. But even two minutes, to me, is way overpowered once you really start investigating what's possible. Overpowered characters are no fun. It's like Superman with no Kryptonite, it's impossible to write, so what authors have to do is to limit the character to glimpses. That means they see, or don't see, the convenient things. That, to me, always felt like a hidden *deus ex machina*, like an authorial intrusion driving the plot points rather than the characters doing so. By having Preble's power only extend five seconds, but consistently, I could have ideas play out against each other, escalate and escalate, never give anyone an off-ramp, and see how it turns out when they're clashing against each other, without sticking my thumb on the scale. I let him play it out to the best of his abilities. I could make the bad guy as intelligent and formidable as possible, and then let them fight it out. If I'd gone any more than five seconds, I don't think that would have been possible.

"One recurring theme in the book is the idea that all institutions end up working against the purpose for which they were created. *The Man Who Saw Seconds* has two wings: the emotional wing, with a father protecting his son, and the intellectual wing, which is this idea that all institutions above a certain size end up working against the purpose for which they're made. The Ministry of Defense starts wars, schools make kids stupid, hospitals end up killing a bunch of people, cars create the remoteness they were meant to overcome. The concept comes from Ivan Illich, the Austrian philosopher — he called it 'counterproductivity,' and it's an idea that once you start seeing it, you can't stop seeing it everywhere.



"Winning the Locus Award was a complete shock. The very first review I got before the book came out was from Alexandra Pierce in *Locus*. I was so happy to read it, and she had a line there, 'Whether it's sci-fi or some other category, this should be considered for awards.' From Alexandra's review to the award, it really feels like the whole novel was bookended by *Locus*.

"The common thread that inserts itself strongly into everything I write is a kind of East European light absurdism. *The Ugly* was a very East European approach to satire. It's not magical realism where people are floating away, but there's just this hint of the absurd, both in little throwaway lines, and in the overall plot. There is an absurdity to the whole story. And beyond it: I just read an EU report on 'the political novel' that cited *The Ugly* as one of the two most important books in Slovak literature of the last 30 years. It's strange and fun to read academics in Berlin and Istanbul arguing about what I meant with my book about a 300-pound boulder-throwing mountain man. Absurdity and gratitude seem like a good combination.

"But that's the consistent theme. I might be jumping genres, but I used to teach workshops on writing satire, and though it's not straight up *The Onion* satire, it's kind of Kafkaesque satire. If I have a signature in my writing, that's it.

"I write what I think will be fun, which probably makes my life more complicated from a career perspective. My first novel was literary fiction, this one is SF, and my next one is crime fiction. The fourth one is sci-fi horror, and then I'm going to settle in on science fiction. Like I said, I'm looking forward to aliens. The crime fiction is mostly done, and I have a good nibble for a deal. It came out of being a *Locus* finalist — a whole cascade of happy things came out of being a *Locus* finalist. Simon & Schuster is putting out a new audiobook version

of *Seconds*, I received a bunch of foreign rights and film requests, and I signed on with a dream agent, Mark Tavani. So it really makes a tremendous difference.

"For the upcoming crime fiction, I came across this incredibly interesting story that I couldn't pass up. If it's fun, I want to do it. Crime writing has a lot of room for that kind of really dry humor. I did find myself missing the ideas that you can play with in sci-fi, but there was still a lot of room for ideas about gangster culture, parallels to our politics, and a sort of tonal tension between the protagonist and author, between the crime genre story and the literary underbelly. It's from a first-person female perspective, which I wanted to write because I thought I needed to strengthen my female characters, or my ability to write female characters. For my long-term trajectory, I'm more certain of anything; I take a Bayesian approach to all of life, it's all probabilistic. There is a very high probability that I settle in on pure sci-fi, because you can say words like Bayesian and people will know what you mean.

"I've written a few short stories, and one of them won the PEN/Nob Hill, a very small PEN prize. That was the first chapter of a novel I gave up on. I lived in Indonesia for six years, and I wrote a novel about the invisible people, part of the local lore and culture. The invisible people use the rivers for their highways. I have a funny anecdote about the invisible people, because it's kind of science fictional. I tend to be whatever the opposite of spiritual is, so I wanted to see these invisible people but knew it would be difficult. My wife at the time was at Art Basel Miami — she was an artist — and I took in a roommate for two months while she was away. He smuggled in a vial of the original Orange Sunshine LSD from Mt. Shasta. He told me he'd grown up with the kids of the Grateful Dead. In Indonesia they have the death penalty for drugs, but he still brought the acid in. And I thought, what better tool for seeing the invisible people!

"So I took some of his Orange Sunshine on a night that was supposed to have the thinnest barriers between dimensions, at the location that also had the thinnest barrier. I thought, if there's any time I'm going to see the invisible people... I stayed there the whole night, until dawn, and I saw hallucinations, but I was still too rational — I knew I was hallucinating, and why. Then, right around dawn, I got tired, so I walked back through the jungle, and I was just like, 'The jungle is so beautiful, I love the shapes and the colors.' It was gorgeous, better than melting candles, and then I came to my house, a traditional Balinese house, and the houses are built to keep away the evil spirits, called *leyaks*: The entries are all 90-degree zigzags, because evil spirits hate 90-degree angles. The frames of the doors also have these jagged-hook decorations on them that evil spirits get snagged on, so they don't want to come into the house. That's where I got the jagged idea for Preble without his precog.

"I was still tripping, and I had to go through these 90-degree angles, and I hated it. I was like, 'I don't want to go through these 90-degree angles!' And I came to my door, and all these hooks, they just felt so irritating that I didn't want to go in my door. Then I had this epiphany: 'Oh my god, I'm the evil spirit!' So I never saw the invisible people, but I got to feel like an evil spirit for a night."

—Alexander Boldizar ■