



# < Dealing With Freedom — And Disaster — In 'Fortune Smiles'

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SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

Adam Johnson won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for his best-selling novel, "The Orphan Master's Son," set in the nightmare state of North Korea. This summer, he's come out with a collection of short stories set in locales that range from California to Louisiana to East Germany to a techno-dreamlike South Korea. His new collection is "Fortune Smiles." And Adam Johnson, who also teaches at Stanford's creative writing program, joins us from the studios of KQED in San Francisco. Thanks so much for being with us.

ADAM JOHNSON: It's a pleasure. Thank you.

SIMON: I want to get right to your story, "Hurricanes Anonymous." We're coming up on the 10th anniversary of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which is, as you point out in the book, is the one - the second one is often overlooked. Tell us about the UPS driver in Louisiana, Nonc.

JOHNSON: The story is set in a hurricane-ravaged Louisiana, after the second hurricane, in which all the disruptions have taken place. The roads are still blocked. Families are broken apart. Communications are down. And in this chaos and uncertainty, the most vital family relationships are tested.

SIMON: Yeah. He's delivering packages, but he has to bring his son on his rounds. Delivering packages, but he's also searching, isn't he?

JOHNSON: That's right. He's searching for the mother of his child. When I lived in Louisiana, I - I grew very close to the culture, to the people there. I developed deep relationships. And after those hurricanes, I felt I wanted to capture through fiction what it was really like to not just lose the siding and roof of your house, but to see families who were torn apart. So I also heard stories about UPS drivers who were emergency service providers, basically, who knew their routes and who kept working through the hurricanes and helped connect people because they knew everyone on their route. So I contacted UPS world headquarters, and I said, could I do drive-alongs with your riders to help research a story? And they overnighted me my brown uniform.

SIMON: (Laughter) I'd read that you went along on the routes, but you actually got to wear a brown uniform?

JOHNSON: I have a picture of me in my browns. But the thing was working with my drivers, who know every single person on the route - what had happened to them, where they had moved. My driver would pull up in front of a house and say, you've got to go in and talk to this person. You - wait 'til you hear their story.

SIMON: You've got a paragraph I'd like you to read to us, just the best depiction of life in Louisiana during the weeks and months that followed, if I could get you to read that, please.

JOHNSON: Certainly. This is set in Lake Charles, La.

(Reading) The boarded-up Outback Steakhouse next door is swamped with FEMA campers, and a darkened AMC 16 is a Lollapalooza of urban camping. It's crazy, but weeks after losing everything, people seem to have more stuff than ever - Teflon pans, old towels, coffee cans of silverware. How do you tell your thin bed sheets from your neighbors? Can you separate your yellowed, mismatched Tupperware from the world's? And there are mountains of all new crap. Outside the campers are bright purple laundry bins, molded plastic porch chairs and the deep black of Weber grills, which is what happens when Wal-Mart is your first responder.

SIMON: How do you get that level of detail?

JOHNSON: I went to Louisiana and just talked to everyone for a couple weeks. I interviewed dozens and dozens of people, and everyone has a particular experience that's seared into their memory. And I just asked them for them.

SIMON: Yeah. Another story - "George Orwell Was a Friend Of Mine" - a former Stasi prison warden lives near his old jail in what's now Germany. And he ridicules the tours the guides, who are former prisoners, give. They're free. Is he locked up?

JOHNSON: You know, the origin of the story came from visiting a Stasi interrogation prison when I was in Berlin for a foreign book tour. And Hohenschonhausen is an interrogation prison that was turned into a memorial for all the victims who survived that place. But in the way Berlin is laid out, all of the guards and administrators and wardens who once lived in the neighborhood kept living in the neighborhood, even after the GDR went down. So all of the children in Germany are forced to be bused to this memorial to experience the legacy of oppression while the oppressors live in the neighborhood. And when I was there, you know, the man who curates the museum told me that the former warden walked his little dog around the - his old prison every morning. And for a fiction writer, something that's half seen is what stimulates the imagination. And that, I - that notion of a man who must circle the place that he's become known for every morning, that is now serving the opposite purpose of what he designed it to be was irresistible to me.

SIMON: You do return to the Korean Peninsula in this book, to North Koreans now living in South Korea. Is it hard to find a place in the world when it's free?

JOHNSON: Well, that was a real concern of mine writing "The Orphan Master's son." What was it like to be raised in such a controlling, totalitarian state? Well, one aspect the book didn't capture is not only what it's like to be raised there, but how do you encounter the free world?

SIMON: Yeah.

JOHNSON: How do you make the transition to the world that we know? And I think in my novel "The Orphan Master's Son," I inadvertently gave the impression that all you have to do is get out of North Korea, and your life's great. But the truth is that the defectors struggle a great deal to adjust to modern life. So imagine what it's like for defectors.

SIMON: Yeah. So how do you feel about that old bromide that the short story is the hardest of all literary forms?

JOHNSON: Oh, I don't know. I think the short story is a machine, and it has lots of gears that turn - voice, style, architecture, chronology, scene selection. They all interplay and make a meaning-making machine that cranks out some understanding of the human condition. It happens quickly. It often happens outside the writer's control. But it's so powerful when it goes to work on a moment of human life. I think they're difficult, but they can be very perfect and powerful. I missed them working on a novel for many years.

SIMON: Adam Johnson, his new collection of short stories is "Fortune Smiles."  
Thanks so much for being with us.

JOHNSON: Scott, it was such a pleasure. Thank you.

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