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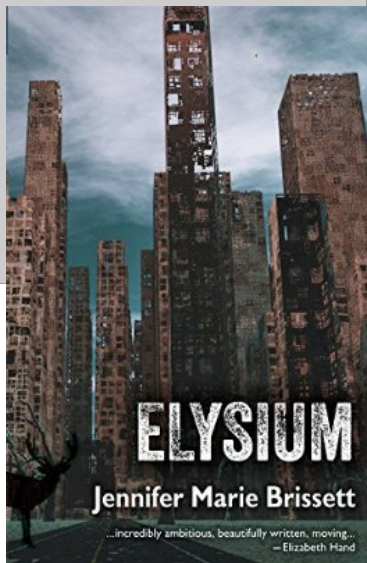
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[GUEST POST] Jennifer Marie Brissett on The Inspiration for Her Novel ELYSIUM

By Jennifer Marie Brissett | Monday, November 10th, 2014 at 10:00 am

Jennifer Marie Brissett is a Jamaican-British American who came to the U.S. when she was four and grew up in Cambridge, MA. For three and a half years, she owned and operated the Brooklyn indie bookstore, Indigo Café & Books. She has a Masters' from the Stonecoast MFA Program in Creative Writing and has published stories in *The Future Fire*, *Morpheus Tales*, *Warrior Wisewoman 2*, and *Halfway Down the Stairs*. Her work has been short-listed for the 2013 storySouth Million Writers Award. *Elysium*, her debut novel, will be published by Aqueduct Press in December 2014. She currently lives in NYC. Her website can be found at www.jenbrissett.com.



The Inspiration for the novel ELYSIUM

by Jennifer Marie Brissett

As I worked on the first few chapters of *Elysium*—not knowing exactly where I was going except that I had a seed idea of gender swapping—my grad school mentor suggested that I consider using a theme. I thought about that for a little bit and then it came to me, I mean the whole book came to me, not word for word or even chapter for chapter, but the story and even the structure of the book all flowed from the theme that appeared in my mind: the story of the Roman Emperor Hadrian and his lover Antinous.

While in Egypt, Hadrian took ill, and Antinous went on a boat ride without him. There Antinous fell into the river Nile and drowned. ... After Hadrian was told of Antinous' death, he went into a fit of mourning so severe that it made those around him fear for his sanity. He never forgot Antinous. On the contrary, Hadrian did what he knew how to do best—he built things. Monument after monument after monument was constructed in memory of Antinous. (198)

The story that flowed out of me and into my novel told more about my state of mind than I ever realized it would. The novel became a loving memorial to New York, a city in a constant state of renewal. I remember watching the buildings falling before my very eyes on 9/11, almost as if they were disappearing into a cloud. I remember seeing people streaming over the bridge and walking into Brooklyn covered in dust and wearing business shoes and heels. I remember that I lost a person who was becoming my friend and being told that she was gone—just like that—gone. In the days following the fall of the WTC, I watched [Ric Burns' documentary New York City](#) and learned that all kinds of hair-raising events have occurred in this city. (Personally, I find the [Draft Riots of 1863](#) the most chilling.) The events of 9/11 were not the first terror attack on Wall Street. On September 16, 1920, [a horse-drawn carriage exploded in the Financial District](#). Many people were instantly killed and injured in this an act of terror by Italian extremists. Seeing that documentary was strangely comforting, as it reminded me that bad things have happened before, and yet the city renews. People renew. We go on.

Since I've been writing in this field, I've heard a lot about world building. Most of it really doesn't make that much sense to me. A world for me is not something you think up, then somehow fit people into it. A world is a place that begins with people and builds out of the things those people need in order to survive. In *Elysium*, the world evolved around the needs of the story that I wanted to tell, and this was how the spiral narrative structure came about.

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The spiral narrative structure is not something new, but I think I use it in a unique way, by letting the computer program that is the book remake the world of the story over and over to tell the tale of loss and mourning over and over and over, a constant reinvention of the same story told in many different ways through different voices and relationships.

I took a real chance with my approach to this novel. I played with point-of-view, gender, sexuality, violence, perceptions of reality, and history. I think that speculative fiction writers have an immense palette that allows us to push the edge of what writing can do. There are so many different ways to tell a story, so many angles to explore. Keep in mind, an idea and/or a theme doesn't make a whole story. The arc of a story is a deeper, more mysterious thing. It's like working on a piece of art. When it's moving, i.e. resonating, you as the artist feel it. And if you're right, your audience will feel it, too. There's an adage that says writers should write what scares them. So in this sense my book is a success, because the entire process of writing this novel terrified me. And I'm pretty pleased with the result.

[Read an excerpt from Elysium.](#)

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6 Comments

Paul Weimer (@PrinceJvstin) says:

[November 10, 2014 at 10:02 am](#)



You had me at Emperor Hadrian 😊

[Reply](#)

Jennifer Marie Brissett says:

[November 10, 2014 at 10:50 am](#)



Thanks, Paul! 😊

[Reply](#)

Karl says:

[November 10, 2014 at 11:49 am](#)



Why use this title? Only last year there was a "major" (if not particularly successful) motion picture of the same name and in the same genre. It seems to me that this book is likely to lose a lot of sales and attention due to people thinking it's just a tie-in to a mediocre movie.

[Reply](#)

Jennifer Marie Brissett says:

[November 10, 2014 at 2:35 pm](#)














The book was titled long before the movie and its meaning is integral to the book. I wasn't about to change MY title because of the movie. Besides, I went to high school with Matt. I think he's okay with it. 😊

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Karl says:

[November 11, 2014 at 10:23 am](#)



Well, I guess it's fortunate that "your" title didn't happen to be "Transformers 4" or something of that ilk.

If this were a more appropriate forum I'd be tempted to tell you the story of how my late mother lost her one and only chance to become a published author thanks to her exaggerated sense of artistic integrity.

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UhHuh says:

[November 10, 2014 at 5:05 pm](#)



Yes I agree that the 1863 draft riots were very disturbing. But the most disturbing part of it was certainly it's own govt and military being brought back to permanently silence the people.

That was probably the first terrorist act.

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 Paul Weimer (@PrinceJvstin) commented on The SF Signal Podcast (Episode 269): Talking about Audio Books with Rachel Cordasco, Paul Weimer, Sarah Chorn and Fred Kiesche (1 days ago)

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