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# Ben Fountain explains the roots of his righteous rage in 'Beautiful Country Burn Again'

The celebrated Dallas writer talks about his nonfiction look at the 2016 election.



By **Chris Vognar**  
Special Contributor

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Ben Fountain's latest book is Beautiful Country Burn Again. (Michael Hogue/Staff Artist / )



Ben Fountain is mad.

He's mad because he thinks both major political parties have effectively shut the little guy out. He's mad that income inequality works to keep the rich and the poor exactly where they are. He's mad that these conditions, which he's been seething over for a few decades now, made it easier for someone he considers to be a threat to democracy to win the presidency.

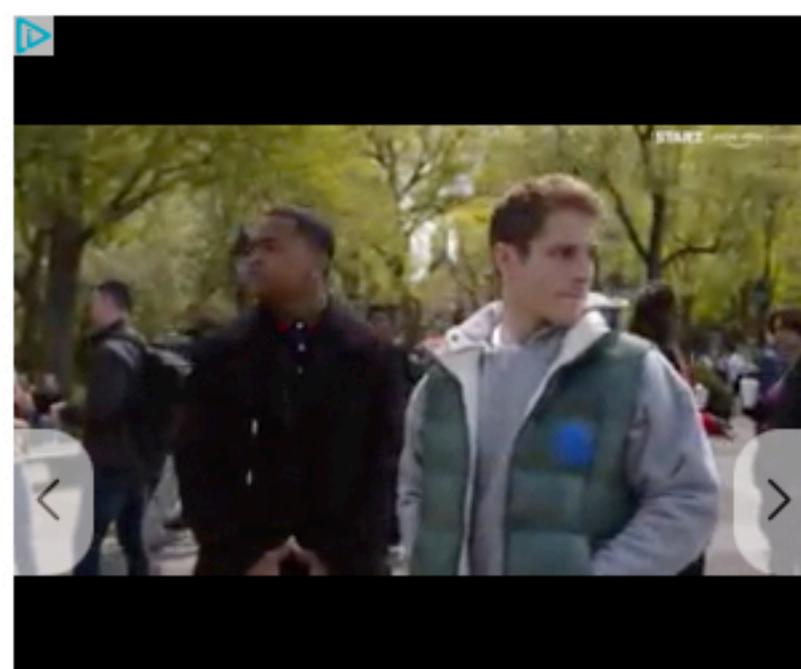


Beautiful Country Burn Again, by Ben Fountain. (HarperCollins / HarperCollins)

Fountain vents these grievances, with eloquence and bite, in his new nonfiction book *Beautiful Country Burn Again* (Ecco, \$27.99). The title, from a Robinson Jeffers poem, is apt. Fountain's widely lauded 2012 novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, let off some steam about the Iraq War. The new one might leave singe marks on your fingers.

The book is often funny, but it's also angry. "Fear is the herpes of American politics," he writes. "The symptoms bloom and fade, but the virus never dies."

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The thing is, when you spend time with Fountain, you rarely see the anger. Sandy-haired, innately polite, possessed of a soft-spoken North Carolina drawl, the 60-year-old North Dallas resident is what you might call a Southern gentleman. He throws Fourth of July pool parties every year. These aren't stuffy affairs: they come with with barbecue and pool hoops, and at some point during these festivities you can expect to hear "Free Bird" blasting from the speakers. (Disclosure: I've been there.)

Fountain is uncommonly generous and helpful to young writers. He's a nice guy. But nice guys can get angry, too. Especially on the page.

"There is a fair amount of anger in the book, but I hope it's *considered* anger," he says on a hot summer morning in his living room. The walls are covered with paintings, most of them accumulated during his travels in Haiti and Mexico. Small stacks of books sit on the dining room table — Philip Roth's novel *The Plot Against America*; *The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick*. It's a cultured house, which he shares with his wife, Sharon, and son, John.

"I feel like the mainstream political leadership of the country has sold working people down the river, and they've done it in the interest of big money and their own careers," Fountain continues. "They have brought us to this existential crisis, and we elect them. We're all responsible for it, but there's so many ways they can manipulate and coerce public opinion. And they're very good at it."

And that makes him mad.



Author Ben Fountain at his home in Dallas in July. (Jae S. Lee / Staff Photographer)

## How it started

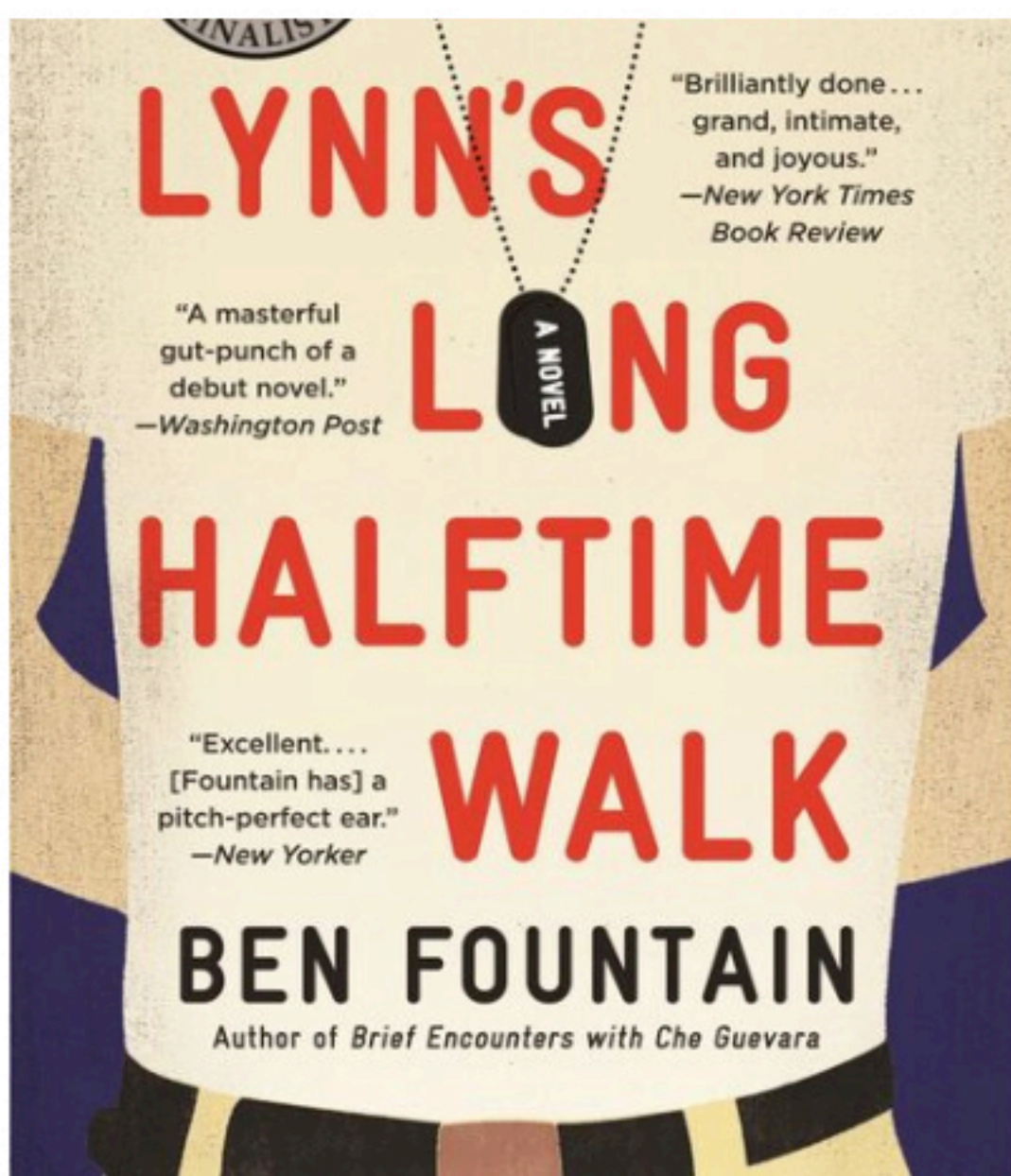
*Beautiful Country Burn Again* began as a phone call from an editor at *The Guardian*, the British newspaper. David Taylor had written about and admired *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, the story of a group of Iraq War veterans trotted out, along with Destiny's Child, as halftime entertainment at a Dallas Cowboys game. Taylor had an idea: Would Fountain be interested in writing a series of columns about the presidential campaign for *The Guardian*?

This was November 2015, and things had already gotten strange. The possibility of a Republican ticket led by Donald Trump was getting less far-fetched by the day. Taylor wanted an American writer on the ground to chronicle the action, follow the candidates on the campaign trail and muse on what it all meant. (Fountain estimates that 30 to 35 percent of the book comes from those *Guardian* columns).

Taylor was impressed with Fountain's passion, and also his restraint.



"*Billy Lynn*, in somebody else's hands, could have been a rant of a book," Taylor says by phone from *The Guardian*'s New York offices. "But actually it was kind of fond and funny. It wasn't self-righteous. He talked to me about the general insanity of



Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk, by Ben Fountain (DMN file)

American life, and I think he captured that in his columns."

He also sent Taylor a reading list, which included Norman Mailer's classic account of the 1968 political conventions, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*. You can feel some Mailer bravado in *Beautiful Country*, as well as the Gonzo touch of Hunter S. Thompson (*Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*). There's also a dab of political philosophy a la Richard Hofstadter, whose 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" predicts today's atmosphere.

Even when *Beautiful Country* feels like a rant, it's a deeply researched rant, steeped in history as well as outrage.

That outrage isn't reserved for any one figure, or any one party. "The Democrats are just the party where things get worse more slowly than the Republicans," he says. He still can't get his head around Hillary Clinton's response — "That's what they offered!" — when Anderson Cooper asked how she could accept \$225,000 from Goldman Sachs for a single speech.

In Fountain's view, both major parties have sold their souls. Or, as he writes, "Hillary couldn't see the forest for the trees due to the elemental fact that she was one of the trees. Thus she could view her Wall Street buck-raking as entirely normal, and be surprised that it was even an issue." Such disconnects are the stuff of lost elections.



Ben Fountain's latest book is *Beautiful Country Burn Again*. (Michael Hogue/Staff Artist /)

## Where it comes from

Fountain grew up in small North Carolina tobacco towns in the 1960s and '70s before his family moved to Raleigh when he was 13. His dad, Ben Jr., was a community college president, but he liked to describe himself as a "school man." He helped integrate public schools in Elizabeth City, N.C., when he was a superintendent there. Ben's mom, Norma, was a music teacher.

From an early age they instilled in Ben an instinct to look out for the little guy.

"They weren't raving liberals," he says. "They were good old-fashioned Southern progressives, and they saw that things had to change. They were insistent that when I was around any adult, black or white, they were to be addressed as Mr. or Mrs. We were all working class, or middle class at best."

Almost everyone was a Democrat, but, as Fountain says, "you had corporate Democrats, and then you had populist Democrats."

The Fountains were the latter, minus the racist taint often associated with populism.

Fountain knew he wanted to be a writer from an early age, but he also thought he couldn't hack it. His fallback plan was solid and practical: The School of Law at Duke University, and a gig as a summer associate at the silk-stocking Wall Street firm Sullivan & Cromwell. This was 1982, and Donald Trump was big. His head loomed from massive billboards; his name filled the New York tabloids.

"I was sufficiently Southern and small-town to consider this kind of thing to be in bad taste, blasting your name everywhere, proclaiming your greatness," he writes.

Fountain practiced real estate and finance law for five years, which was enough to convince him he didn't want to do it anymore. But he did fall in love with and marry a tax lawyer, Sharon, who encouraged him to focus on his writing career. "She made partner at her law firm on a Friday," Fountain says. "I gave my notice the next Monday."



Ben Fountain at his home in Dallas. (Jae S. Lee / Staff Photographer)

*Billy Lynn* was his big breakout; *Beautiful Country* is his nonfiction debut. But it's been cooking in his head for years. He's always been an alarmed political wonk — he remembers watching the 1964 Republican National Convention, when he was 6 — and his fiction hasn't shied away from the workings and corruption of power.

"It's been a lifelong project to try to understand the country and what America is all about, and what it could be, and what it is," he says. "This book may have come out of a particular moment in time, but it's been building for a while. You could say I've been preparing to write it for a long time, even though I didn't know it."

Which gets at a key point about *Beautiful Country*: It's not a Trump book. Yes, it was inspired by the topsy-turvy 2016 election campaign. But much of Fountain's ire is reserved for those sold out their progressive ideals, rather than those who never had them in the first place. This is what makes him burn. (A bit too brightly for some: the Dallas Museum of Art, after considering featuring Fountain for an event, told him no thanks after learning of the book's contents.)

"In Trump, some forty-six million Americans saw their chance to throw a wrench into the workings of the power machine, and they took it...Now a demagogue lives in the White House," he writes. "The Democratic Party helped put him there. If the party can't transform itself into an instrument of genuine resistance and renewal, let it die and make way for the necessary new thing."

Fountain doesn't deny the country's beauty. But he's not sure a fire is such a bad idea.



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