



K I N G D O M *of* I N K

Jackson Bentele

Memoir Ghostwriter

hourly: \$65

Jackson Bentele writes screenplays, stories, film criticism, podcasts and comic books. Based in Los Angeles and a graduate of USC's Screenwriting program, he has worked in writers' rooms for high budget superhero sagas, mid-range horror-comedies, and start-up podcast companies (that would go on to be acquired by Spotify). His own work has been nominated for the Humanitas Student Drama Fellowship, and landed him on the Tracking Board Launch Pad Pilots list. As a ghostwriter working with your original material, Jackson values collaboration highly. His goal is to help you find the narrative sculpture imbedded within your life story, and to be the guide that brings it forward with all of its emotional integrity, thematic purpose, and human heart intact. There is a thin line between reality and fiction, but the possibilities are boundless. Nothing excites Jackson more than venturing into that untamed narrative wilderness in search of stories that deserve to be told.

When he's not writing, Jackson works as an outreach volunteer and co-chair for the SELAH Eagle Rock Homelessness Coalition, dreams about wanting to hike more, and reads eight books at a time in his favorite chair because it's definitely more efficient that way.



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Acid Days

(Memoir-to-Fiction)

Jackson Bentele

There was something made of sand, and it stood beneath an overturned sky. Wind buffeted this created thing and blew pieces of it free into oblivion.

It decided to move, and it took shape from where there was once just indistinguishable noise. It emerged from the background and became a self, and soon enough you realized that self was you. And before you, a scene that seemed programmed for some sort of screen. The faded yellow brick shone iridescent in late day sun, and the bay breeze tilted at windmilling flags that protruded from the building's roof like a crown's thorns. Between columns of windows hung strands of mountaineering cords, engaged in chaotic entanglement, hair blown in convertible wind. As you raised your compositing eyeline up this Rapunzel hairfall, the voices reached you.

"Krack babies! Behold this tank of life!"

This vocalist, you knew him. His life unspooled through your memory in reverse motion, a revitalizing carpet shake of the brain. You saw him last night in the communal showers, pounding vodka from the bottle, amassed in a pulsing mound of flesh. He waved for you to join them. You watched instead.

Days before that, he disinvited you from the third floor on the weekend of the ambulances. That was when, behind close doors, they had decided to use some of that trust fund to hush down worry around campus and earned this Independence Day.

Earlier still, he shook your hand on that first night and said, "You're home." And that his name was Joshua.

Things kicked into forward motion from there. This current performance of his was most likely owed to his newly acquired status as the Lincoln or Manson of

this place called Casa Zimbabwe. He hung from a web of REI gear religiously repurposed as an airborne altar for a shaman with a barrel leased from 7-Eleven as his mystic sacrament.

“Behold the Sky Keg!”

The other pillars of sand gathered about you shook into life, with shouted glee. Some part of you answered in turn, but your laugh seemed silent. Your tongue fell from parted lips, and the drained slip of paper fluttered out and joined the rest of the visual detritus that swam before your eyes.

You thought, he’s going to fuckin’ die.

And then you thought, I want to do more drugs. You wanted to mix and match. You wanted to make yourself a pool of chemicals because that was where you could finally end. Something else could take up the slack, like the team of shirtless gods who hoisted Joshua and his Sky Keg, braced against the upper balcony, their own brains similarly slathered in serotonin.

We were all in the process of psychedelic metabolism, ourselves the content of some great creature’s belly.

With this horrifying thought, you rushed inside. You hit the door with your back turned, and spun inside like cinema. You realized what all those studies meant when they said we were more like octopi than we imagined. That our own tentacles did have minds of their own, and it was only that the ego shielded itself from the truth of matters. The motion of the ocean, twenty-four frames per thought, you skipped through the hallway, and found joy in each bounce.

Sound caught you, and the scene changed, though you had already forgotten you were in a movie. A door open, beckoned. Somewhere a song played and you wanted to follow it. That seemed imperative. But you knew who once laid behind that door, and you felt that electric bite at the back of your teeth, and —

You decided to vomit, so you hit the toilet hard, and cracked your tooth, bruised your forehead. A blip of unconsciousness left you facedown on cold porcelain, concrete reality. A look in the mirror fixed that. You slid back down against the wall of the stall, and you caught the words of the Casa’s anonymous poet laureate scratched into cheap plastic siding.

You rolled back your head, and your floaters birthed angel wings, took off

toward fluorescent heaven, and you felt at one with the world, and you felt beyond the world, and you felt nothing for the world, and you felt nothing is the world, and you started to reread those sketched words because you thought it hid or revealed something, and then, from outside, you heard the cables snap and a great collective gasp rise up to fill this beast of a building like a flume of bedraggled and careworn breath.

FPS

(Fiction Excerpt)

Jackson Bentele

Devon found that his new school felt like a prison. But, like, a nice prison. One with a courtyard in its twisted brick heart where two trees towered over lunching pre-teens. In the shade is where the true teenagers sat, those so ready to depart for their next correctional facility, where they could smoke behind the gym instead of in the history annex bathroom. It was far too easy to be discovered there, amongst its cool blue tiles, a Greek bathhouse for those who could not yet drive.

Devon's only friend, so far, spent his lunch period in that very bathroom, but Devon didn't have the guts to partake. George was far savvier than he first appeared. Devon found it admirable how his thirteen-year-old mentor wore button-up shirt camouflage. George did not dress like the cool jocks, who constantly flaunted the mandated tuck-in rule with their oversized basketball shorts and graphic t-shirts adorned with such clever phrases as 'Sarcasm... only one of the services that I offer'. Devon could see it pained George to do so, but everyday his secret rebel arrived on school grounds with nice shoes, khaki pants, and a belt that he despised more than anything in the world. It was brown leather, with a gold latch that held it together, that bounded the limits of perception around George like some spell out of Hogwarts.

Devon's mother had taken to calling George's smile a Haskell smile, out of some sitcom far in the rear view. Devon knew his mother held suspicions about his friend, of what might lie behind that smile, but all the same she liked the kid. Her eyes shone when George spoke to her, in a voice and cadence very much like an adult himself. She felt exactly like Devon had when he first met George. As if they had finally met a real person.

It wasn't that Houston was an unfriendly place. It wasn't that it was so different from New Orleans either. The same low, gorgeous clouds that grew heavy with melancholic gray every few weeks. The same miasma of heat, a sort of

ectoplasmic atmosphere that felt like walking through an evaporated fog of one's own sweat. The same grease of fried cuisine that would follow the touch of fingers all day, leaving the surfaces of the swamp city gleamed with desire. What felt most foreign was the proximity of that mighty Interstate 10, and the sprouting of communities and strip malls off its spine, a flowering concrete growth. Their apartment complex was tucked right off the main drag. Its three floors seemed massive to Devon, used to his small family home back in Louisiana. But that was gone now. Mom told him so. When he asked after the rest of their family, she would shake her head and kiss the back of his.

"They're okay, baby. Not so far away."

Devon had slept through most of their drives westward, so he wasn't sure of the real distance outside of abstract figures. It hadn't been a direct journey either. They stopped over in Baton Rouge during the winter and the subsequent spring months after Katrina. His mother's sister took them in, a woman whose smile seemed weary yet not false, at least not when it was directed toward Devon or her own son. She got Mom a job at the UI office, understaffed. They'd leave each morning under slate dawn sky. Devon liked to get up early and watch them drive off. He'd have a few rare moments of silence in the still foreign apartment, tip toeing around another life. He always grabbed at least half an hour on his cousin's GameBoy before the day awoke in earnest. Because soon enough, he and his cousin would be placed under the home-schooled tutelage of his Uncle, a strict man who yearned for the marshes, always uncomfortable even in small Baton Rouge.

It was his Uncle's will that his cousin not attend school, and while he was under the same roof, the same dictum applied to Devon. His mother's eyes flashed when his Uncle first laid down that law, but when his Aunt touched her arm, she cooled. Devon felt as if he was about to enter into some strange rite, caught between moments of time. As if he and his cousin were selected by divine law, and would now be brought up like the Chosen Ones of the films they watched each weekend.

"I'll give you some of the truth they won't in any public establishment. Trust, it's what y'all need to hear. What this world's really all about." His uncle spat chew juice into a waiting canister, knowing it both disgusted and enraptured the two near-teens in his presence. "This country's a rat nest, and the hierarchy of vermin rule. Clever, in a scrambling way. Fast moving and beady eyed. Dirty. Full of shit. Now sure, opportunity. But the hand offered ya, the one promising you the ladder up? Always remember, that slickness ain't sweat. It's fresh blood.

What do you think really brought down those two towers? Worldwide goodwill? Hell, domestic goodwill? Shit. You think that Osama fella was smart enough to bring about such a reckoning, don't ya. You and you young guns, itching to pull a trigger on some of his pals out in that godforsaken desert? That's how they want you to feel. Bloodthirsty, just like them. Only you don't get the money. You make it for 'em. Tied together tailwise, struggling and biting and killing each other and everyone else. They'll make ya a king. Sure. Rat-kings, all of ya."

His cousin seemed beaten down by the harsh education that mostly entailed outpourings of revolutionary U.S. history, perhaps a complex lecture on mathematics before lunch, and then a hasty exile to the blacktop apartment parking lot for a long afternoon of basketball, as his Uncle had real work to do. Left to their own devices in such a way, Devon wondered whether that long chain-link of time called schooling had come to a close. With the arrival of the hurricane over New Orleans, a new chapter would now begin.

Yet his mother laughed when Devon suggested such a thing. She told him that soon his Uncle would no longer be a tutor of any kind, not even for his cousin. No, his Aunt would be taking Devon's sole companion to Arkansas, where another branch of the family kept aloft. His Uncle refused to join, stubbornly insistent on staying in the land that had fostered him his entire life. Devon didn't find that so unreasonable, but he voiced no such opinion to anyone over those final, tense dinners, soundtracked by American Idol from the living room television. His Aunt and mother voted every week.

At first, Devon thought they would also be Arkansas bound. But it seemed his mother was quite hesitant about their kin there. A bad batch, she often said. His Aunt's eyes fell at such comments, and his cousin would pretend not to hear, nudging the lime green GameBoy to Devon for another try at Frieza. They were galactic, basketball-slinging warriors. His cousin's flair for the dramatic on the court left an impression. It's as if by taking up the rules of the game, the structure of that private world, his true power emerged. He handled the ball with such ease, such deft precision, and would often create his own moves named after Dragon Ball battle cries.

"This is streetball. Kamehameha, cuz!" The ball would arc high and almost seem to slow in mid-air, truly enchanted. But when it crashed into the backboard, the long frame of the communal parking shed shook with ferocious energy, as if battered with the high velocity winds of a storm.

The Florida Project & Disney's Broken Circle (Essay Excerpt)

Jackson Bentele

Look around in a crowd and it's easy to feel both physically confined and personally alienated. Environments like Disneyland and Disney World, along with so many of the stories produced by the entertainment giant, strive to give us the illusion of being one happy, global family. This is not inherently insidious, but it's time to accept that it's not completely innocent either. It's quite easy to lose one's bearings these days, and in a world drowned by information, cultural safety rafts can be excused as necessary evils.

A few months ago, I stepped out of the Los Angeles home I am privileged enough to rent and ordered a ride share that I am lucky enough to afford (and perhaps, given certain open secrets about the implications of these services, careless enough to patronize). On the way to my friend's apartment, the driver and I struck up a conversation, and I soon learned that she was one of the first female security guards at Disneyland, back in the days of Walt. Decades gone from that halcyon time, she still cherishes her memories of the work. She said it was the best part of her life. There was a community amongst the employees, and all their families knew one another. In fact, her daughter still works for Disney, as one of the princess cast members who spend their days wholeheartedly giving themselves over to the great dream of Walt's world.

But a new tone entered her voice as we kept talking about her daughter. She told me Walt wouldn't be happy about the way things were being run now. It wasn't the same place. It wasn't the same dream. Perhaps she was referring to the 2018 report by the Coalition of Resort Labor Unions outlining the fact that one-tenth of Disneyland employees had "been homeless in the last two years...[and that] nearly three-quarters [said] they don't bring in enough money to cover their monthly basic expenses." Average hourly wages have dropped since the turn of the 21st century even as the workforce ages up into the myriad responsibilities of American adulthood. All the while, corporate profits continue to rise.

Was my driver correct? Would Walt be disappointed with the direction of his company? In 2019, Walt's grand-niece Abigail Disney spoke out at the first annual Fast Company Impact Council against the monumental bonus Disney CEO Bob Iger received in the wake of the Fox merger. This put his pay at over a thousand times more than the average Disney employee. According to Abigail: "I did the math, and I figured out that he could have given personally, out of pocket, a 15% raise to everyone who worked at Disneyland, and still walked away with \$10 million."

As my ride share moved across the nightscape of Los Angeles, that factory of national illusion and delusion, the conversation with my driver soon shifted into a different gear. The hardships and inequities placed upon her family by this new, bold Disney had politically reactivated her. Now, she believes in a new dream, spoken by a new "visionary" business leader. Certainly, this billionaire can save America. Either way, come 2020, he'll certainly get her family's vote once again. On that dire note, I was dropped off on a busy street corner in Hollywood. Walking to my friend's apartment, I passed club goers in expensive clothes, street vendors sheened with sweat beneath midnight stove light, and homeless Angelenos catching a few moments' rest before an enforced migration to another Main Street, on another night, in another reality. A sky-high neon sign blasted into radiance like fireworks above the Magic Kingdom, but in that moment we all felt like strangers to one another.

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