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## NYT's best-selling author speaks at LLLC

By Lou Fancher



From left: Joe di Prisco, Beth Needel, Ben Fountain and Vickie Sciacca. Photo Lou Fancher

Approaching the two-year mark after the 2016 Presidential election, many people continue to puzzle over what happened, why it happened, and the impact Donald Trump's presidency will have on the future of the United States.

Chief among the curious is New York Times best-selling author, scholar, and former attorney Ben Fountain. Appearing Oct. 17 at Lafayette Library's Distinguished Speaker Series, Fountain presented his new book, "Beautiful Country Burn Again" (Ecco). Approximately 80 people attended the event moderated by Simpson Family Literary Project Chair and author Joe Di Prisco.

"Beautiful Country" chronicles the steps and missteps taken from the 2016 Iowa Caucus to the National Conventions to reverberations in the weeks following the election. With over 400 footnotes, the pointed and mostly even-handed indictment of American politics is

written with well-researched zeal and the unrelenting inquisitiveness of an investigative journalist. Referencing tumultuous periods in American history, Fountain demonstrates scholarly expertise as a master philosopher, especially in contextualizing contemporary partisanship or socioeconomic and cultural crisis within the nation's similar struggles over slavery during the Civil War; economic suffering during the Great Depression that introduced President Roosevelt's New Deal; and the blurry, drifting class and race messaging of Democratic "neo-liberalism."

Importantly for readers, Fountain writes with the flair of a poet, often with sharp satire worthy of Saturday Night Live or a Monty Python skit. Consistently, the language displays thoughtful, profound respect for the ideals upon which America was founded - freedom, liberty, inclusiveness, independence, democracy. Despite the country so often failing to attain its lofty manifesto, Fountain is a romantic, unwilling to release the dream.

Fountain's debut novel, "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk," won numerous honors, including the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2012. Born in North Carolina and currently a resident of Texas, he left law in 1988 to become a full-time writer. His work has been published by Harper's, The Paris Review, The Guardian, The New York Times and more. In Spring 2018, he was named one of five finalists for the Simpson Prize.

"He covers the conscience of America," said di Prisco, introducing Fountain. "On every page, he plays for keeps. The stakes are sky high. Like the great prophets of old, he wants America to wake up already."

Fountain said we live in strange and confusing times. Social media "numbs us out and dumbs us down." Libraries, periodicals and books, he said, are a remedy for mobile devices that make him jittery and are "compulsive machines that don't allow room for contemplation." In politics, by allowing the free market to be the arbiter of justice instead of representative government, he said we're giving up self-determination and agency. Reality may have outpaced even journalists. "Maybe it's the novelist who can really get a grip on all this," he suggested.

But when The Guardian commissioned a series of articles, he hoped that writing as a journalist about the campaign and election as watershed moments in politics might help him understand "why things turned out the way they did." Compiling and expanding the essays into a book, narrative chapters of key political episodes and topics alternate with chorus-like "Book of Days" chapters that spin out dizzying accounts of events within each month leading up to and one-month past the election.

"I certainly don't have all the answers or even most of the answers," he admitted.

But Fountain may have come up with a vital formula for seeking understanding: develop solid questions; point arrows at all players on all sides within the political field; back up every fact, quote and data point with multiple sources. "This book is filled with footnotes," he said. "I want your eye to drop from the text right down to the bottom of the page so you can see for yourself right away whether or not I'm telling the truth."

The truth is frequently painful. Money rules candidates, regardless of party. And educating people caught in the grip of a rip-roaring, fact-dishonoring media feed that he calls the "fantasy industrial complex," has limitations. Ultimately, he said, "Reality has a way of biting us in the ass. Humans have always had a capacity, a gift, the curse of escapism, distraction, fantasy. Our mainstream culture serves us very poorly. It

shows in our politics."

Asked during a Q&A about solutions, Fountain offered majestic and matter-of-fact replies. A return to the fairness doctrine that prevented corporate media companies from monopolizing the information market and establishing social order embedded in the notion of equality came first to mind. "If we stay true to what is the best in our country, maybe the good guys will win," he said. Disappearing into the writing or reading of a big novel, sweating while doing yard work and loving your local library provided everyday, attainable actions.

Anne Grodin of Lafayette left the event with another manageable task: to read Fountain's book. "I come to the lectures to be exposed to new ideas. I appreciate that his book isn't all one point of view - it's a balanced report. I like that, because I need to figure out why part of the country was having such a disparate point of view from the other part. The footnotes mean he's a true journalist. It's not just someone's opinion."

For a schedule of upcoming author lectures at LLLC, visit <https://www.lllc.org/program-category/guest-authors/>.

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