

CHRISTOPHER. I loved your novel, Bella.

(Beat.)

It's one of the best things I've ever read.

~~BELLA. (To audience.) It feels as if a warm stone has been dislodged in my throat.~~

† ~~tell him that I'm so glad to hear this.~~

by CHRISTOPHER. (To audience.) Published in hardcover in 1997
W. W. Norton & Company, Billy Baird Runs Through A Wall by Bella Lee Baird is essentially a social science fiction novel disguised as young adult literature.

It's about a high school senior, the titular Billy "The Blur" Baird, who convinces his unincorporated town that he's going to run through a brick wall. The novel, written as a diary and authored by one of Billy Baird's less-endowed, slow-footed, adoring classmates, Cecil, charts the months leading up to the fateful event. The speed training. The hours in the weight room. The careful meditation. The overheard discussions with a science teacher about particle physics and relativity.

In the end Billy Baird fails to disastrous, tragic, and even comic effect, but his Middle-American town, which has received a windfall of national press leading up to the preposterous wall approach, refuses to acknowledge the tragedy. They will themselves to believe that he "disappeared into thin air." Instead of what actually happened, which is that he broke his neck. And died.

(He reaches into his backpack and produces a *cared* paperback edition of Bella's novel. He turns to the last page, reads from the book.)

"Later I went over to Billy's house to check on his mom. The front door was wide open. Mrs. Baird was kneeling on the kitchen floor, right in front of the refrigerator. Tears were streaming down her face. The only sound was the chorus of neighborhood cicadas blending with the hum of the refrigerator. Beside her were all the contents of the fridge: cold cuts and ketchup and cottage cheese. Leftover Hamburger Helper and a blueberry pie wrapped in foil. A big bowl of pancake batter and bottles of salad dressing. A half-drunk gallon of milk and all of the shelves and cubbies. It was as if Mrs. Baird was praying to the refrigerator or waiting for a secret knock. The knock would come and then she would stand and open the door, and there he'd be: her only son, Billy Aloysius Baird, exactly as he was before he ran into Founder's Wall at 22.4 miles per hour. He would be in perfect health, his body glistening and unbroken. But he'd be tired, as if he'd just returned from a long trip and had thousands of stories to tell. Like maybe he actually did discover the Fourth Dimension or he floated backwards through some unknown astral body. Or maybe he met God, who really is a ten-foot rabbit with silver elk antlers.

Then I would hand him this diary and he'd smile and thank me for being such a good friend; for writing all of this down.

And after that, Billy and his mom would step aside and I would walk into the refrigerator. I would take his place in the other world.

'Goodbye, Cecil,' Mrs. Baird would say. 'Don't forget to take your asthma medication.'

'Be brave,' Billy would add, closing the door behind me. But none of that actually happened.

What actually happened was that Mrs. Baird turned around, took my hands, and I knelt down with her and we cried and cried and cried."

(Reading QC the back cover.) The Washington Post Book World named it one of the best books of the year, comparing it to the work of fabulist novelist Robert Coover. Kirkus likened it to Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."

BELLA, (To audience.) And some of the more absurd stories of Kurt Vonnegut.

CHRISTOPHER. (To audience.) Kurt. Fucking. Vonnegut.

BELLA. (To audience.) The New York Times Book Review, however, wasn't so kind.

In a heavily qualified review, a peer novelist tepidly praised the overall vision of the book and Bella Lee Baird's undeniably evocative sentences, but ultimately dismissed its two-hundred and-fifty-six pages as - Quote - a slightly hokey pastiche of dreamy, anecdotal Middle-American folklore — Unquote.

CHRISTOPHER. But fuck The New York Times, right?

BELLA. sure.

CHRISTOPHER. (To audience.) And then i talk about how she successfully traversed the fine line between absurdity and sincerity; how in lesser hands the novel might've come off as antic; how emotionally invested I was in Billy Baird's simple, Herculean goal.

CHRISTOPHER. (To BELLA.) It functions brilliantly as a fable for our capitalistic, celebrity-obsessed society failing its younger generation.

And our hunger for faith and miracles in a godless universe.

I also like that you gave Billy your surname.

BELLA. I've always regretted that. I consider it to be one of the more sophomoric choices I've made in my career; one that begs the reader to somehow interpret Billy as a stand-in for his author.

CHRISTOPHER. Yeah, Billy Baird. Bella Baird. But I enjoyed considering the possible autobiographical tension between the two of you.

Cool author photo, by the way. You sort of look exactly the same.

BELLA. I had a better ass back then.

(Beal.)

CHRISTOPHER. So where's the new one?

BELLA. The new ass?

CHRISTOPHER, No, the new book. It's been a long time. Like almost twenty years.

BELLA. Sometimes things have to gestate.

CHRISTOPHER. Gestation, sure.