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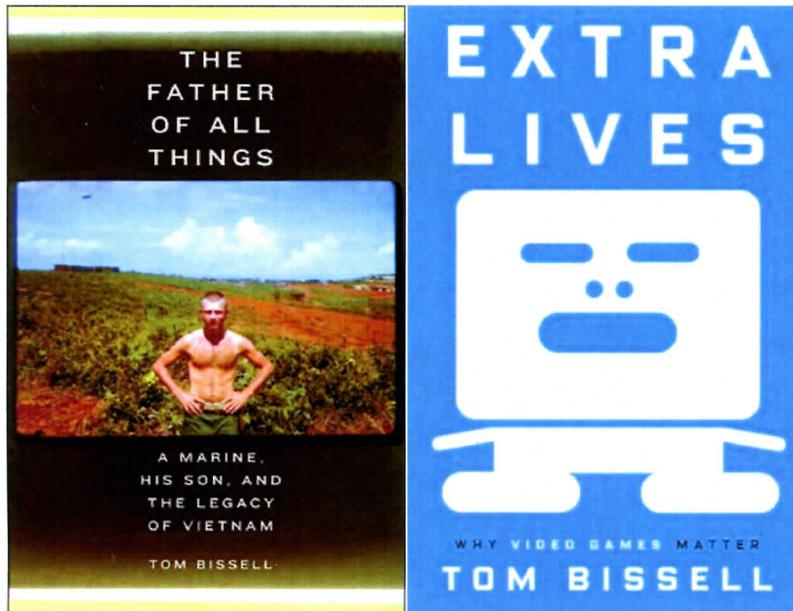
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BOOKS, AUTHORS AND ALL THINGS BOOKISH

On the unusual career arc of writer Tom Bissell

September 23, 2011 | 6:17 pm



Writer Tom Bissell has won major awards, including the Rome Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He's a contributing editor at the Virginia Quarterly Review, publishes regularly in all the right places, teaches at Portland State, and writes incisive, layered nonfiction books, including "The Father of All Things: A Marine, His Son and the Legacy of Vietnam."

Yet from a position of esteemed literary acclaim, he's begun staking out territory firmly in pop culture, first with "Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter," now out in paperback. That's not all -- as Aaron Mesh writes in a [profile of Bissell](#) in Willamette Week, "I saw the best mind of my generation, and he asked me to watch a crappy movie."

That movie is none other than "The Room," a 2003 independent hyperdrama that's become a [cult favorite](#) for its incessant awfulness. Bissell has become obsessed with the movie, writing about it in Harper's and signing on to co-author a book with Greg Sestero, the actor (well, sort of) who played the film's hunk and betrayer.

"I think Greg's and my desire is the same: to write something first-rate about something fifth-rate," Bissell tells Mesh. "At some point I kind of realized: This could be the novel I never write." The book is tentatively titled "Locked Inside the Room."

Mesh writes:

Tom Bissell is not a household name in Portland. But in the two years he has lived here, teaching creative writing at Portland State University, he has quietly ranked among the most dexterous, savvy and chameleonic wordsmiths in the country.

Bissell, 37, writes essays and short stories. His specialty — honed in five books, with another three on the way — is traveling to remote places and making them intensely personal....

He is relentlessly prolific: In the weeks between my first handshake with Bissell in early August and the article you're reading, he wrote a profile for *The New Yorker*, reviewed the new Nicholson Baker novel in *GQ* and published four lengthy essays at the au courant sports-and-pop-culture website Grantland. In that same time, his story about a honeymoon gone wrong in Rome, "A Bridge Under Water," was picked for *The Best American Short Stories 2011* anthology.

"The Tom Bissell mood," is, Mesh writes, "ambivalent about his career trajectory." Whether it's veering back toward a heady literary stratosphere or deeper into the pleasures of pop culture, one thing is sure: He's going to be working on a secret video game project soon -- in Los Angeles.

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-- Carolyn Kellogg

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