

Return of the Rivethead: A Conversation with Ben Hamper  
Brian Stout

Ben Hamper's *Rivethead* is a classic portrait of working class life, hilarious and disturbing. Long-time Flint residents tend to recognize more than just the scenery. It seems like everyone claims to know someone who knows someone who is in the book. *Rivethead* became a best seller, and Hamper has been working on a number of projects since his shop rat classic drew attention to the realities of working on the line for General Motors. The book stands up today as one of the best portraits of working class America. For most people, Hamper's other most memorable moment is his scene in *Roger and Me*, describing how The Beach Boys' "Wouldn't it be Nice?" was the soundtrack to his breakdown. He is a long way from the assembly line these days.

Hamper now lives in Suttons Bay. He returns to the city that inspired his best seller often to visit with family and friends, though. His trademark sarcastic wit, used to wonderful effect in the book, remains intact.

"I come back to Flint monthly to visit my daughter and her family. I'm not really involved in the Flint scene anymore—unless you count tipping a few at the Ambassador or checking out a Flint Generals game," he said.

Lately, Hamper has been taking care of his father in St. Petersburg, Florida, who was diagnosed with throat cancer earlier this year. The experience has made Hamper conscious of his own health, as well as his relationship with his father.

"The experience had a profound effect on me. Not only did it prove that I could discipline myself to do a host of rather unpleasant care-giving chores, but it really gave me an insight into the rather fractured relationship I've had with my father over the years," he said. "I was also able to achieve something I would've never thought possible—watch Jerry Springer three times a day and live through it."

The experience has also inspired Hamper to begin work on *The Wind has Claws*, a book on his relationship with his father. He's also been working on a collection of poetry that might come out next year on a small Canadian press, and a collection of non-fiction he has written over the past few years, including material written for Michael Moore's website. However, don't hold your breath waiting for release dates.

"I'm renowned for dumping projects like other guys rub out cigarettes," he said. "The biggest project I've worked on was the follow-up to *Rivethead*, a book about traveling around the U.S. in the midst of agoraphobic tremors called *America Drinks and Goes Home*. I received a large advance for this book, but I ran into some editorial disagreements with its direction and it's sort of stalled out there on the tracks, as dated as the Nick Garvey Band."

Another development in Hamper's life is the tentative repair of his fractured relationship with Moore. Hamper didn't want to talk about the cause of the rift between Moore and himself, but he said they are talking again after a long dry spell.

"We're somewhere between soft and cuddly and long time, no see. Perhaps we'll reunite formally on a telethon, a la Martin and Lewis," he said. Hamper praises Moore's Palme D'Or-winning smash *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

"It's been held over here in Sutton's Bay for a few weeks, which is a really strange yet encouraging thing as this place is as thick with Republicans as it is with fudge stores and mosquitoes. I enjoyed the film. As with anything Mike does, it doesn't pull any punches. If it helps to rid this world of Mr. Bush, how could it be looked upon as anything other than crucial?" he said. Still, Hamper is far from an activist these days.

"I've never been a political sort. I get too flustered just trying to figure out how to keep my riding mower in service. The extent of my politics goes something like this—'You'll never use me again for your stepping stone, because I have to draw the line between the dirt and me.' I'd like to take credit for that, but it's from a Johnny Paycheck song," he said.

Continuing along the lines of the Paycheck hit "Take this Job and Shove It," *Rivethhead* has sparked some interest from Hollywood in the past few years. Filmmaker Richard Linklater, who directed stoner cult classic *Dazed and Confused* and more recently *School of Rock* and *Before Sunset*, met with Hamper a couple years ago about a possible film adaptation of the book. Other parties have expressed interest, too..

"I just spoke to a couple young guys from L.A. about optioning the rights. They were really passionate sorts who envision themselves as independent movie producers. The only problem is that these guys are about as financially solvent as I am, which bodes terribly for any realistic movie-making. The last time I spoke with Linklater, he was still interested, but I haven't heard anything from his camp in a year or so. I've learned that nothing moves quickly in Hollywood. I don't spend too much time thinking about it anymore. If it happens, it happens. If not, we always have hard-hitting cinematic endeavors like *Dodgeball* and *Along Came Polly* to keep us engrossed," he said.

Still, Hamper feels that there is a place for a film version of *Rivethhead*, and that it has the potential to connect with audiences as the book did.

"There hasn't been a decent film that gives realistic illumination to what it's like to work in an auto plant—or for that matter, any American factory—since Chaplin's *Modern Times*, and that was seventy years ago. I could see it as being similar to the response that the book had on people. The popularity of the book was due in large part to the fact that, for once, this was a sincere account of what takes place in a factory by someone who attended one every day, not some academic poking his head in for

voyeuristic opportunism. If made correctly—and I think Linklater’s script legitimately captured the realism of the book—it would be a very effective release, both from an entertainment and a cultural standpoint,” he said.

With some people in the city suggesting that Flint become a college town to return to its glory, how does the Rivethead see the potential transformation of Flint?

“I’m a bit out of the loop on this one, but I’d rather see businesses return to Flint,” he said. “Maybe they could soothe both sectors by re-opening the College Inn.” Hamper sees new Mayor Donald Williamson as a step in the right direction.

“I think electing Williamson was a good start. Not that I think he’s especially qualified to effect much change, but it’s good to have someone at the helm who isn’t afraid to make a giant fool of himself, especially in Flint. I’ve always had a soft spot for Don since I accidentally cut him off once on Miller Road and he responded by flipping me the bird and bathing me in a flood of colorful pseudonyms for the female birth canal. At least I think it was Don. Maybe it was Dean Howe,” he said. Still, there are some things that Hamper misses about Flint.

“I sorely miss the camaraderie of friends down there. It gets somewhat exhausting blithering on about cherry crops, snow predictions, walleye fishing, and the intricacies of three-handed euchre. I also miss seeing live bands, shop bars, and good pizza. I will say that I don’t miss the crime, though,” he said.

And Hamper has one request for the citizens of Flint.

“Bring me the head of Howie Makem. Seriously.”