

# DRIFTWOOD PRESS PRESENTS A NEW DEBUT NOVEL



**Release Date:** February 28 2023

**Publisher:** Driftwood Press

**ISBN:** 978-1-949065-19-0

**Format:** Paperback

**Price:** \$25.99 USD

**Genre:** Fiction, Novel, Literary

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**Distributor:** Ingram

"**BARK ON** IS ONE OF THE STRONGEST DEBUT NOVELS I'VE READ IN YEARS. THERE'S NOTHING WEAK ABOUT IT, IN FACT: FROM THE SENTENCES TO THE STORY TO THE BEATING HEART OF IT ALL, THIS BOOK HAS AN EXTRAORDINARY MUSCULATURE. I REALLY ENJOYED THIS NOVEL."

— DANIEL WALLACE, AUTHOR OF **BIG FISH**

Ezra Fogerty is an aspiring professional triathlete training out of his ma's trailer in the eroding North Carolina beach town of Kure. When the recently disgraced celebrity coach Benji Newton shows up at his doorstep offering to train him for the Chapel Hill Ironman, Ezra accepts eagerly.

Benji's methods prove brutal and ritualistic, and seem connected to Kure's abruptly climbing coyote population. As Ezra begins to question the logic behind his preparation, Benji invites the orphaned prodigy Casper Swayze to train with them. The diminutive Casper one-ups Ezra in every workout until suffering a disastrous injury that coincides with Benji's disappearance, leaving Ezra to choose between caring for Casper and completing preparations for the biggest race of his career.

## DEAR READER,

From the ages of ten to eighteen, I spent thirty hours per week swimming, biking and running. I skipped school to train. I ran so far and hard that I broke both my feet. I starved myself down to the sinew and stunted my growth in a self-sabotaging effort to become a professional triathlete, but there was an underlying compass to my actions more powerful than any performance goal: OCD.

Compulsion is a kind of superstition, and it drove me to escalate my training well beyond the point of productivity. It would take ten years away from the sport before I'd healed enough physically and emotionally to return to a starting line. *Bark On* emerged while I was rediscovering the joy of long bike rides and runs during quarantine. Endurance sports demand both exertion and restraint, a rigidly planned training and nutrition strategy combined with the reckless abandon to push through exhaustion in a race's final miles. I needed to write something that portrayed the neurodivergent experience of that complicated relationship. What if an athlete's compulsion to push farther made them susceptible to magical thinking? How might a superstitious coach take advantage of this, and at what point would the threshold be crossed between consent and exploitation? I envisioned a North Carolina beach town much like the one I grew up in, imagining the population being driven out by hurricanes and erosion. An invasive species decimates the fragile ecosystem and becomes incorporated into the athletes' rituals of recovery and training. My own OCD emerged from a need to control myself and my surroundings. That struggle is at the heart of endurance sport: the athlete strives to master their own pain threshold and technique in pursuit of the absolute apex of physical capability. That limit will always be asymptotic, a fact that the coach in *Bark On* refuses to accept even as his athletes are forced to come to terms with it.

Ezra Fogerty is a triathlete desperate to break through into the professional ranks. When celebrity coach Benji Newton takes an interest in him, Ezra thinks he's found his ticket to glory. Benji moves to the eroding barrier island of Kure to prepare Ezra for the Chapel Hill Ironman, inviting the orphaned endurance prodigy Casper Swayze to join them. Benji pits the two athletes against each other in brutal and unorthodox sessions, and they forge a bond through shared suffering in the midst of their rivalry. Meanwhile, a growing pack of coyotes gathers on Kure. The animals seem to have a grudge against Benji, and the drastic measures that he takes to combat them offer Ezra and Casper glimpses into their coach's mysterious origins. When Benji's madness drives Casper to a career-ending injury, Benji disappears, leaving Ezra to question what it was that Benji really saw in him: a promising athlete, or someone gullible enough to host him while he laid low in the aftermath of disaster? Only Ezra's nomadic mother can set him on the path to an answer. The truth that they uncover throws them into a world of folk magic, murder, and obsession, forcing Ezra to reevaluate his own motives for pursuing triathlon. Will he stay in Kure and care for his friend Casper, follow through with the Ironman that Benji's training has him poised to win, or track Benji down to face the harsh truth of his own origins?

A fraught and giddy portrayal of the intersection between superstition, trauma, and compulsion, *Bark On* explores the disbandment and rebuilding of a family. The spirit of the project emerged from my own experience as an elite junior triathlete and a need to understand the ways that high-level endurance sports can both soothe and feed into OCD.


SINCERELY,  
MASON BOYLES



Mason Boyles grew up in southeastern North Carolina, where he trained and raced as a nationally competitive junior triathlete until the tired caught up to him. He studied writing at UNC Chapel Hill, earned his MFA from UC Irvine, and is pursuing his PhD at FSU. His fiction has appeared in publications such as the *Masters Review*, the *Adirondack Review*, and *Driftwood Press Magazine*, and received nominations for the Pushcart Prize. *Bark On* is his first published novel. He watches informative videos about hammerhead sharks, and enjoys mountain biking, surfing, and jiu jitsu.







"Bark On is one of the strongest debut novels I've read in years. There's nothing weak about it, in fact: from the sentences to the story to the beating heart of it all, this book has an extraordinary musculature. I really enjoyed this novel."

— DANIEL WALLACE,  
AUTHOR OF *BIG FISH*

"Every sentence, every paragraph, is dense with inventive language. [...] Driven by uncanny energy and imagination, *Bark On* is a gripping and insightful novel."

— KRISTIN RABE,  
FOREWORD REVIEW

"Reading this novel is like traveling in an old truck at a hundred miles an hour, and yet often soothingly so. How Mason does this is a rare act of talent and vision and originality. You're simply flying down the road in great literary style. You'll want to hold on to your hat to keep it from flying off. You don't want to stop reading once you start. It has a great plot, totally memorable characters, and a captivating Southern landscape. What a book!"

— LAWRENCE NAUMOFF,  
AUTHOR OF *SILK HOPE, N.C.*

"*Bark On* is a novel squarely and worthily in the tradition of such high-style masters of Southern vernacular as Barry Hannah and Cormac McCarthy. It immerses you in the coastal-Carolina low country, where the streets are "named for the nearest water threatening to sink them," where "thunderheads anvil down" and the language is a flood of startling invention that somehow feels both ancient and inevitable. It takes you both inside the world of elite triathlon training and to the extreme edge of that already-extreme sport, exposing the "meticulously random" cycle-of-abuse training methods of a charismatic, celebrated coach and two young, uncelebrated prospects he's grinding down and grooming. This is an outstanding and even breathtaking debut by Mason Boyles—a novelist who's here for the long haul."

— MARK WINEGARDNER,  
AUTHOR OF *THE GODFATHER'S RETURN*

"Mason Boyles writes incandescent prose, searing, exacting, utterly shocking, and all in service to a story of vicious determination, desperation, and a very true and perverted love.

*Bark On* is a brilliant debut."

— MICHELLE LATIOLAIS,  
AUTHOR OF *EVEN NOW, WIDOW, SHE*



## CASPER

What RoboCop don't get is how hurt makes you heaten. Moving hurts because it heatens you, and heat's just the littlest of you moving. Atoms squirming loose. What's he think is sweat? It's the you melting out of you. You pool down to wet, even spread out sky-wide as steam. That's what RoboCop's afraid of, spilling out to dampen some ditch the varms drink from. Reckons hurt's a thing you got to go hollow to hold. That's why he strives so thermos. Plays cool like he's metal. Plays sealed to keep from sweating. Tries to harden to contain the hurt, but Benji's the one holding us. Digging a ditch for us with instructions. RoboCop's got this hunch I empty when I run, but I just let myself liquid and flow whereverso Benji points me. Hurt's heat, and heat's moving. Put a cube of ice up against a puddle. Put a puddle up against steam. RoboCop must've missed that day of science class. Gander him stomping my heel so the hurt-heat thermometers up my leg, heaping his glare onto me. That's why RoboCop stays behind: he don't see how hurt-heat turns to speed.

See him irking at me jumping standing. Hear him groan when Benji goes-gets our swim goggles. RoboCop gaums my arm and I swat it. Because plus and minus can't touch. RoboCop's plus and I'm minus and both-us are held together by the nuclear of Benji. Like the littlest bits of one atom. Saw about them on a poster once. The poster was done up on that kind of plastic that glows so white with light it shines over its own image. Stuck on the wall of this man who picked me up hitching away from a rainstorm south of Gastonia. I said toward the dry to his ask of where to. And we drove some keeping quiet, just clucking his blinker and squawking the wipers. Had them going before the monsoon even caught up, like they might clear his own thinking. Then the thunderhead anviled down and he said he couldn't conscience me out on the roadside with this weather and did I want a bed for the night or at least till this drench blew over, only he'd already clucked his blinker about eight miles back and turned off the highway and the whole full of that silence since it had already been decided and I'd sat in it and knew. Only question was which end he wanted. Said the son was off at college; said his wife was visiting kin down-way of Knoxville, but

from his front door down the hall I didn't see one picture. Plain wall until the atom poster in the bedroom he took me to. Like he'd had a thought to keep letting on, then reckoned if he got someone this far they were both past the fib. And you do wonder what starts and quits a man. This one said reckon you'll catch cold if you don't get out them clothes. And I stepped out my shorts without waiting for him to step out because ever since he'd clucked that blinker we'd been past that.

"Ain't stupid," I said.

His sitting squealed the mattress behind me. "So come here. Teach you something."

I backed up and kept my eyes on that wall-atom, wondering what kind of microscope and where was it pointing when whoever discovered that. The whole meantime he was tugging my worm I stared all my hurt at it. Him saying I'll show you like I hadn't been busting in trucks and tents and toilets and dumpsters ever since Ms. Ida rubbed that first hurt-heat out of me. Bet RoboCop busts to bikes. I'll show you, the Atom Man said, only he wasn't saying that to pretend to me. That was his own act because his other hand was working his own worm the whole going. Going till the hot melted down and founted and some more me had leaked out of me. It pooled in my lap while his other hand was on himself still a-pumping. My gunk stuck his palm to the back of my hand when he grabbed it. Pulled the chap off my knuckles; had the eczema real bad around then from dry winter and chlorine. The rain he'd picked me up from was the first good soak of that year and it was nigh on to February. Dumb to remember them things. Funny what-all the brain snags on when it's trying to divert from worse—which I'm fixing to get to. But first the Atom Man put my hand on his own little worm and I looked up at that poster and read the word I'd been staring at: atom. A tom, like one cat. I'd always reckoned it was Adam like the first person, the most basic unit. And I snorted in the middle of tugging him and he said, don't you laugh at it. Show you something funny. And he did. And I melted more with the heat.



One more funny thing is this varm-trap of an island. One good rinse shy of a sandbar. The beach access juts out them dunes and midairs like a toothpick, the sand gulped out from under it. Shorebreak backwashing right through the fenceposts clenching dunes. RoboCop stubs up behind me. I jump off into the sand and my heel mouths open, yapping. I don't fall; just sit down real fast.

"You got shots?" RoboCop asks.

"Fuck a vodka."

"No. Vaccines. Like for tetanus."

The soft in his voice turns me. There he perches, curling his toes over the edge like a diving block. Looking at me like I'm the pool he's fixing to dive into. Like he thinks I'll hold the hurt he's fixing to go through.

Then Benji presses up behind him. "Pier and back, Tootsies."

Both-us gleamed off his sunglasses: RoboCop plussing up on fleeing me. I hop into the water and swim out of the feel of his plus-shove and don't look back because Benji taught me. Because before that. Ever time I turn full-around I see all them years before Benji like the bad half of a glass. One lifelong of empty.

The day I took the Atom Man's truck he was still going on about his wife and son, both-us sprawled on the bed and long-busted. I just stared up at that atom poster. The June sun scrubbed the picture off it with like a paintbrush white-washing graffiti. Atom Man talked himself to sleep. I reached his wallet from where his piled pants and left him no more than a smear of his own burst gauming the billfolds together, which was the undoing of how he'd done me in February. I walked up the hall chewing on what he'd gave me to laugh about that first evening. Filled my head up that way to keep from noticing all his frank-kindness. Like him tying his shoes real slow in front of me to teach me the knot without ever saying he was teaching me. Like the hotdogs cut up and lumped in with the macaroni. Like a pool out the back and his own treadmill and anything. The Atom Man's

name was Adam. That was what he gave me to laugh at; he'd meant that statement plain instead of threatening.

What RoboCop wouldn't understand was how Adam making me laugh was worse than the hurting I'd been expecting. Because that—the not hurting, but his plain-meaning—was why I stayed those four months. And Adam said it then because he knew it would be. So I lathered up a wrath over that as I was leaving, scrubbing even his frank-kindnesses until they shined like what they all were: the same trap. Because I could've gone soft eating them hotdogs. Could've tied my shoelaces to run on the treadmill when it was airish out or raining. Could've bumped down the speed if I was sore, and next thing I'd be staying in bed the damn livelong, and then four months would bloat up like my belly and I'd no-count in Gastonia never moving or hurtingening or amounting to anything. That's what Adam wanted. Thinking that wrathed me right on around and I went back to his pile of pants for his truck keys. I stood up and he'd stirred, maybe from their jangling.

"Fixing to run," I told him. Standing full-facing him with his wallet and keys.

But he hadn't seen what I was up to, or the footboard was blocking his view, and anyhow he was still thick with half-sleep. Could've used them windshield wipers about then on his thinkings. A nod's all he gave. Antsy, he called me.

And I came over and planted one on him, which I'd never done. Because it wasn't never like that—never lips but hands only. That kiss went about like an atom's pluses and minuses touching, that brushing adding all the more force to our aparting. Me planting one should've tipped him. Maybe he knew I was for-good leaving already. Maybe "antsy" was him good as telling me take the pickup. Frank-kindness can be hard to plain-say. Well, I ran from Gastonia how I told him, driving off in his truck, and it was easy as sitting up on the hoods and masting your back to a tailwind. Just had to get going. I'd lived as his alleged insect for whole seasons, playing his little Antsy from February until June.



Adam the Atom Man. The world sometimes is the strangest stuff. And I know he weren't lying about his name because I had his license with me.

A sob and some siphoned gas after that I took a 2.4-mile dip in a lake and dried off with a bike ride and topped it with a little marathon at the Chapel Hill Ironman. Well also some naps in the truck. Also parking out back of hotels and hopping the pool fence to swim. You try getting up a good hurt with ten yards of open water between flip-turns. Enough to make a man's head go like that branch RoboCop's rotating. Sometimes I wobbled inside saying I forgot a towel. Puddling heelprints right up to the front desk in that icebox seem-like that's common to all hotel lobbies: as if the A.C.'s coming up through the tile, the same freeze cramping up through your fascia cooling up through the air to where you're just waiting to see your breath steam. Sometimes did. Swear. Sometimes asked the desk person for one-them complimentary chocolates. Took the elevator up and grubbed off left-out trays of room service, even. You wouldn't believe some-them bounties. They got this enchilada I guess no one likes at the Hyatt. You can count on folks taking a bite or two before quitting. Sometimes seemed I was eating better than hotdogs and macaroni in that period. But I biked all the lard off. I went longer than live-long, pedaling on through the night. Times I was so crapped I propped the bike way-off at the far side of a rest stop and left it out there when I stiff-legged into the bathroom, hoping I'd come out and find it gone and the ride would end preemptory. Because the ride wouldn't end otherwise. But I always came out and there it was by the sign where I'd propped it. That brought the sobs. Climbing back on the bike, wiper-eyed and lungs rattling. Keeping on even past dozing off, waking up to honks and red lights. So all that. Maybe it was all part of the same shoving-off I

got after planting one on Adam. No tell how long I'd've gone on if I hadn't snagged Benji's eyes after the Chapel Hill Ironman. I was taking a lap of the parking lot to jog the steam off, savoring the just-doneness when he bulged up on me. Swelled out the medical tent gnashing on his hair's long part. Wasn't even looking my way, but I sweat-felt his waiting. That belly-his convexing him, like a nuclear the above and under of him was circling. Biting on them split ends. That haircut's got a name, I was thinking. He just stood there gnawing it till I ran even with him. Then he hummed. That tune kudzu'd right on up my legs and tangled me.

"You run like you hump." First thing he told me.

I let him have that one. Hunch on him like he knew both halves of it, how a glass does: holding all my full and my empty. He stuck a receipt to the sweat on my chest. A phone number was scrawled on the side facing up. He told me to call after Thanksgiving. Promised then that he'd've found a home for me. Adam gave me home like a bed, but Benji was going to give me a fence. I could see it in the see-through of his looking. Them big sunglasses gleaminger than that atom poster, reflecting instead of whitening—showing me to me. More than that, showing him: Benj was looking through me. Then he told his secret name. And then-on ever day I was counting days.

Thanksgiving come and gone and I called the first second of midnight. He picked up before the first ring. Both-us had been sitting up, and that knowing right away petted me. All he said was an address. Said it twice, sticking his words to me like that receipt. Then he hung up and I drove to this flooded varm-bed of marsh they talk up like it's a beach. And that's the windup to how I am, swimming after his tug with my heel yapping. That hurt's heat, and heat's speed. Only thing to it is to how I always done and keep moving.