
UCF Forum

7-14-2021

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David Poissant

University of Central Florida, David.Poissant@ucf.edu

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STARS Citation

Poissant, David, "Coffee in the Age of COVID" (2021). *UCF Forum*. 463.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/463>

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Coffee in the Age of COVID

By David James Poissant
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, July 14, 2021

I miss going to my regular coffeehouse, but what I miss most is being with people.



There's a coffeehouse not far from where I live in Oviedo. It's a chain coffeehouse, so if you know America, you know the coffeehouse I mean.

When I'm downtown in Orlando, there are any number of excellent independent shops I like to support, but where I live, miles from the city, one neighbor has a horse and

another keeps chickens. On cold nights, I hear the chickens clucking. On colder nights, my neighbor brings the chickens in.

Not much, then, in the way of coffee, except for the place by my house. That's where I write—or wrote—five days a week. Before the arrival of COVID-19, I dropped my daughters off at school, then arrived at my coffeehouse by 9 a.m.

Kevin, the man who most days works the morning shift, would greet me. Kevin plays in a band. I've never heard his music, and he's never read my books. It's not that kind of friendship. Which isn't to say that it's a lesser friendship. It's a friendship that doesn't require admiration for one another's art. Kevin makes my coffee. Sometimes I tip him extra. Sometimes my coffee is free, a perk that comes along with being a regular.

Before the pandemic, my office was the coffeehouse.

Then, most days, I get to work—or got to work—finding a quiet corner, facing away from the windows and the rest of the customers, firing up my laptop, securing my noise-canceling headphones over my ears, and navigating to one of three audio recordings I keep bookmarked: bathroom fan, airplane hum, summer storm. The white noise blocks out coffee orders, background conversations, and the chug and hiss of the espresso machines. Within minutes, I'm in a trance, the world falls away, and I can dream my way into fiction.

Most of my novel, *Lake Life* (published in paperback by Simon & Schuster last week), was written at this coffeehouse between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., before I returned to my daughters' school to bring them home for the day. Now, our home is their school, and my bedroom doubles as my office.

But before the pandemic, my office was the coffeehouse. There, I would drink two cups of coffee, maybe three, dark roast, with cream and a dash of sugar. I like bitter, and I've always preferred strong coffee to lattes or cappuccinos that tend to be mostly milk.

After weeks spent on a 2016 book tour across Europe, I returned to Florida and, for a month, drank straight espresso. But I never found anything in Florida approaching the strength of the ristretto shots I grew fond of in Venice and Milan and Palermo. (This, I recognize, is a pretentious-sounding sentence. In truth, I haven't traveled particularly widely, I just got lucky with my last book. And I don't drink dark, strong coffee to feel cool. I'm decidedly un-cool. I rarely drink alcohol. I don't smoke. And, as a matter of fact, the darker the roast, the less caffeine the coffee has. I just happen to have a palate that favors bitter. I'll take dark chocolate over milk chocolate any day.)

When asked why I don't prefer writing at home or in the office that UCF provides, I have several answers. First, I'm undisciplined. If I'm home, there is the TV. There are walls of books. There's the bed. Any number of things are more tempting than sitting down to write for hours. Once I've started, found my way into a story, I'm good, on task—but resolving to sit down and write for the day, that's the hard part. At the coffeehouse, there's no TV, and I bring no books. I don't even activate the Wi-Fi, so as not to be

distracted by Twitter or Facebook's endless scroll. No, if I'm at the coffeehouse, I have one job, and I do it. After all, my afternoons and evenings are occupied by teaching, so if I don't write in the mornings, I don't write.

Then there's the coffee. It's always a little better at the coffeehouse than the coffee I make at home. I have a coffeemaker, a French press, and an overpriced espresso machine. I order the best beans. I grind them fresh. Still, I can never match what they do there.

What I miss most about my coffeehouse, though, isn't the coffee or the gift of a place to write. What I miss most, I've discovered, is being with people. If it's true that you can be lonely at a party thrown by friends just for you, it's also true that you can feel loved surrounded by people you don't even know.

At the coffeehouse, once I've finished talking to Kevin, even after I've plugged in my laptop and turned my back to the crowd, there's a feeling that rises from the floor and tangles up in the rafters, a security that comes from being among others, as in church, each of us struggling in a job or a marriage or just trying to finish a novel, everyone alone, but together, a body of humans, breathing as one, warm, at once, all in one place.

It's been more than a year since I stopped going to the coffeehouse, and I have yet to return. The coffeehouse is open. Everything, where I live, opened up almost a year ago. But I'm wary. Even masked and vaccinated, it will be some time before I'm comfortable writing among others, breathing the same air. And this is a loss.

I miss Kevin. I miss the taste of coffee made the right way by pros who know what they're doing. Over a year in quarantine, and my home brew still pales in comparison. Though, if nothing else, I've proven to myself that I can write anywhere. A new book is finished, and another is underway, so all is not lost.

But I'd trade this, the books and my newfound productivity, trade it in a second to return to a world pre-pandemic. To sit among strangers and friends, and strangers as friends, and feel safe. To not be afraid of my fellow humans.

David James Poissant is an associate professor at the University of Central Florida where he teaches in the MFA program in creative writing. He can be reached at David.Poissant@ucf.edu.