

In Defense of Brandon Sanderson: An Experiment in Empathy

If we were living in an older, nobler, and bloodier age I would, in lieu of writing this perhaps somewhat self-indulgent essay, instead be tossing my glove to the cobbled street before the feet of Mr. Jason Kehe, glaring into his eyes and (with a commensurate quantity of self-indulgence) challenging him to a duel in defense not of any “damsel” per se, but rather in defense of Brandon Sanderson. For those of you unaware of the outrage that has occasioned my ire, Jason Kehe, a writer for that most vaunted of publications WIRED, recently published a piece on best-selling and legendarily kind fantasy author Brandon Sanderson wherein he expresses bafflement at Sanderson’s popularity, belittles Sanderson and Sanderson’s family and friends and fans, and generally behaves like a caricature of a big-city elite responding scornfully to a normal, middle-American person. You can experience it for yourself here: <https://www.wired.com/story/brandon-sanderson-is-your-god/>.

However, since we live in an age wherein dueling has wisely come to be considered a suboptimal form of conflict resolution, I will instead strap a metaphorical piece of silk the color of Brando Sando’s metaphorical livery to my metaphorical arm and ride into the metaphorical arena of writing, where we shall joust with pens in lieu of swords.¹

But in fact I find myself already at cross-purposes with my metaphor. As much as I would like to spend this essay aggressively dismantling Jason’s article (which would be quite easy), I am instead going to attempt something more difficult and (I hope) more worthwhile. I am going to endeavor, despite the prevailing impulse within me to throw things at Jason, to instead come a little bit closer, through painstaking imaginative effort, to loving him. I am attempting this for several reasons.

1. Brando Sando told me to:
https://www.reddit.com/r/brandonsanderson/comments/1200dzk/on_the_wired_article/
2. Jesus told me to.²
3. Jason Kehe himself, while certainly not telling me to, or even asking me to or wanting me to or in all likelihood caring one way or the other whether I do or not, does seem to invite such a response because, as Brando Sando himself has pointed out, he does to his credit seem to have made a misguided but genuine effort to *understand* Sanderson. Jason’s failure to do so is both sad and important. Why has Jason, despite seemingly wanting to really get a handle on what makes Sanderson tick, ended up failing so abysmally?

¹ These “pens” are also metaphorical, in fact, since I (and presumably Jason Kehe, who will from this point on be referred to simply as “Jason”) am writing on a computer.

² I will not pretend that I have a particularly solid track record of doing what either Brandon Sanderson or Jesus tells me to do, but I give it a go every now and again.

I will begin this undertaking by engaging with Jason's writing about Sanderson via rewriting what Jason has written.³ This might not sound like it makes a whole lot of sense, but stick with me, and I think it will.

Intending Towards Brandon Sanderson

Ok, so I might have lied in footnote 3. I am feeling the need to explain a little bit of phenomenological background before I launch into my project here (but I will try to relegate most subsequent engagements with phenomenology to footnotes). I am aware that I run the risk of losing your interest at this point, so I am going to break this section into numbered points (thus chopping the theorizing into bite-sized portions) and also intersperse random opinions about birds to keep things interesting.

1. By "Intending Towards Brandon Sanderson" I am referring to the terminology of "intention" and "intuition" first established by Edmund Husserl, the boring but brilliant founder of phenomenology. "Intuition" is any impression of a "being" (be it a tree or a sentence or even a human person) received by you or me. What I experience as a tree is my intuition of the tree. (Bird Opinion: Despite the manifold savagery of seagulls, I believe that blue jays are actually more malevolent in spirit.)
2. However, the intuitions we receive are shaped by the "intentions" we bear towards those things in advance. When I look at a rocky cliff face I might intend towards it as a beautiful natural formation, and the intuition I receive will thus most likely be of the cliff-as-natural-beauty, carrying with it a sense of majesty, an overall impression of grandeur. But perhaps a rock-climber is standing next to me, looking at the same cliff, but intending towards it instead as an object to climb. The rock-climber's intuition will accordingly differ from my own. They will receive an intuition of the cliff as a challenge to be overcome, focusing on details I did not perceive and overall experiencing it through a very different lens.⁴ (Bird Opinion: I have through my work as an educator discovered the existence of an alarming anti-bird prejudice amongst a sizable minority of the "youth," and I believe that we must all, irrespective of creed or culture or party, band together to correct this tragic malformation in perception.)
3. My purpose here is to imagine what "intention" Jason has borne towards Brando Sando in order to receive the "intuition" that he has seemingly received. I will then try on a different intention to see what intuition of Brando Sando I myself might be able to encounter based almost exclusively on the information that Jason has directly or implicitly provided. My further intent is to incrementally intend differently towards Jason Kehe himself, thus altering my intuition of him. (Bird Opinion: Doves are sweet, delicate, lovely birds with less intelligence than

³ I might as well admit to you now that this process will also involve quite a bit of dialogue with phenomenology, because I'm that kind of nerd and because I think through most things from a phenomenological lens. I will, however, attempt to minimize the potential pretentiousness of using Jean-Luc Marion and Merleau-Ponty to defend Brandon Sanderson from a slightly uppity WIRED writer.⁴

⁴ I might have stolen this example from Sartre? But I'm not sure, and frankly I don't care, because Sartre (although a clever thinker) was a worm.

cucumbers. Pigeons, on the other hand, are their streetwise, crafty cousins who would cut us all for breadcrumbs if they were able to wield a switchblade.⁵)

Alright, enough theoretical appetizers. Our palates are now primed for the main course, so, without further ado, let us begin our experiment in empathy with the passage wherein Jason first recounts his encounter with Brandon Sanderson in the flesh:

Sanderson, when I eventually meet him in person, makes versions of these excuses, plus others, for his writerly obscurity. It's kind of fun to talk about, until it isn't, and that's when I realize, in a panic, that I now have a problem. Sanderson is excited to talk about his reputation. He's excited, really, to talk about anything. But none of his self-analysis is, for my purposes, *exciting*. In fact, at that first dinner, over flopsy Utah Chinese⁶—this being days before I'd meet his extended family, and attend his fan convention, and take his son to a theme park, and cry in his basement—I find Sanderson depressingly, story-killingly lame.⁷

He sits across from me in an empty restaurant, kind of lordly and sure of his insights, in a graphic T-shirt and ill-fitting blazer, which he says he wears because it makes him look professorial. It doesn't. He isn't. Unless the word means only: believing everything you say is worth saying. Sanderson talks a lot, but almost none of it is usable, quotable. I begin to think, *This* is what I drove all the way from San Francisco to the suburbs of Salt Lake City in the freezing-cold dead of winter for? For previously frozen dim sum and freeze-dried conversation? This must be why nobody writes about Brandon Sanderson.

So, recklessly, I say what's on my mind. I have to. His wife is there, his biggest fan, always his first reader, making polite comments; I don't care. *Maybe nobody writes about you*, I say to Sanderson, *because you don't write very well*.

Let's take this encounter beat by beat. I'll keep this brief since an aggressive criticism of Jason is not my stated goal. Jason has come here to try to figure out why Brandon Sanderson, despite being so massively popular, has had so little said about him in literary circles (and also

⁵ That said, the beauty of pigeons is criminally overlooked. Particularly striking about many pigeons is the iridescent quality of their wing and neck feathers. There is a shifting greenish glisten to their plumage that reminds me of the way light plays across pools of oil. It is perhaps this connection to urban pollution that makes people see pigeons as more dirty than beautiful, but beauty in something dirty, whether oil or “trash-birds,” is, to my mind, all the more beautiful for redeeming its point of origin.

⁶ I have decided that, in future, I might utilize middle-of-the-line Chinese food, as a sort of screening methodology, a way of determining whether or not I am engaging with the sort of person who uses the word “flopsy” unironically.

⁷ Jason is oddly dependent on this word “lame.” He uses it similarly to describe Hugh Jackman (“Hugh, lame Hugh”) who has also apparently failed to live up to Jason's standards. It's a strange choice of terminology, one that conjures up connotations of a rather puerile attitude more at home in a middle school playground than in a professional publication, but also an interesting one. What is this quality of “lameness” that bothers Jason? What does “coolness” look like? If we had the answer to that question, we might have the answer to our underlying query: “What intention is Jason Kehe bearing towards Brandon Sanderson?”

whatever circle WIRED falls into). At first, things are going fine, but then Jason begins to become frustrated because Sanderson's reflections on his purported lack of literary reputation are, to Jason's mind, not "exciting." He goes on to say that Sanderson's words are not "usable" or "quotable." And these comments really give the game away. Jason, although he does seem to harbor some intention to get to know Sanderson, is demanding that he get to know Sanderson *as* someone sufficiently compatible with the intention Jason is bearing towards him in advance. Jason is sifting Sanderson and Sanderson's words through a sort of filter, attempting to extract only what he deems "exciting" from him. In short, Jason is making perhaps the most dangerous error any of us can make—he is not intending towards a human being as a human being. He is intending towards Brandon Sanderson as a thing-to-be-written, as a collection of material that may or may not be transmutable into the kind of thing that Jason wants to write. But intending towards a human being as a human being requires, always and without exception, intending towards them as a thing-to-be-loved.

In Jason's defense, this encounter is not the end of the line, and his position on Sanderson does change somewhat over the course of the article. Jason never extends a gracious or generous or even borderline-kind attitude towards Brando Sando, but he does become slightly less mean-spirited as he experiences multiple days of unflinching magnanimity from Sanderson. Nonetheless, even with those provisos in place, "mean-spirited" seems like an undeniably accurate way to characterize a description of this kind:

He sits across from me in an empty restaurant, kind of lordly and sure of his insights, in a graphic T-shirt and ill-fitting blazer, which he says he wears because it makes him look professorial. It doesn't. He isn't. Unless the word means only: believing everything you say is worth saying.⁸ Sanderson talks a lot, but almost none of it is usable, quotable.

The absurdity of this physical description is especially obvious to anyone familiar with Sanderson's demeanor and his repeated comments about the way he dresses. According to Sanderson, he has no fashion sense, so he asked his sister for advice, and she suggested he wear a blazer over his graphic tees in order to give himself a brandable and distinctive look that might make him look a bit more like a professor. One suspects that this is what Brandon told Jason, resulting in the upsetting mischaracterization above. So what does all this tell us? How can we see Jason's intention at play here?⁹ We see frustration leaking out—Jason is seeing Sanderson as

⁸ Reflective of the attitude of someone who believes that not every word he hears is worth hearing, a lie which must, absolutely must, be seen through and rejected and cast off before we can revel in the light of the truth—that every word heard is worth hearing because every word slips from the lips of a human being, an infinite and unknowable mystery. Every word is a thin ray of light shining through the keyholes that provide each of us the only access we have to the teeming, brilliant selves locked within the rooms in which we all dwell.¹⁰ Every word is a clue (and therefore interesting) as long as we embrace the other as mystery and do not demand that they conform to the intention that we bear towards them in advance.

⁹ Of course, I have to be cautious here. My description of Jason's "intention" is nothing more than a hypothesis, and it will remain that because I simply do not know enough about Jason Kehe for it to become anything more or less certain. If I were to take my hypothesis as knowledge, I would swiftly begin distorting my intuition of Jason in the same way that (I suspect) has distorted his own intuition of Brando Sando. But more on this later.

grandiloquent because Jason does not like the words Sanderson is speaking. They are words that, just like the “flopsy” dim sum, fail to fulfil the criteria by which Jason is measuring them. From that point of view, Sanderson’s talkativeness and his absolute gall in considering himself an expert on the subject of himself (“sure of his insights”) is grating.

But enough of this. Let’s turn to something more positive. I am going to rewrite Jason’s paragraphs by applying a new lens (i.e. bearing a different intention towards Brandon Sanderson). Now, I of course do not have the privilege of actually being-there-with Brando Sando, and I have to work with information pre-filtered through Jason’s problematic lens. Nonetheless, I will see what I’m able to encounter by imaginatively entering the space Jason has opened up for me, and bearing towards Sanderson an intention of genuine curiosity, care, and perhaps (in a dimly aspirational way) love.

The results are as follows.

Sanderson, when I eventually meet him in person, offers some of these same possible explanations for his writerly obscurity within more “literary” circles. But he seems far from concerned about this fact. I think sometimes that I might detect, in the way Sanderson begins to ramble a bit nervously when we touch on this subject, some lingering insecurities, perhaps even a hint of sadness.

But here is not a man wringing his hands over any seeming lack of approval from the more hoity-toity of the literary tastemakers. He’s excited to talk about his work or even his reputation—excited to talk about most things. He sits across from me in an empty restaurant, exuding a confidence rarely exhibited even by those writers who do enjoy the enthusiastic support of the upper echelons of literaria. There is something a bit mysterious to me about this unflappable assuredness at first. Over our first meal of aggressively unpretentious Chinese food—this being days before I’d meet his extended family, and attend his fan convention, and take his son to a theme park, and cry in his basement—I do not yet understand what I will eventually come to learn—Brandon Sanderson is buoyed up above the vagaries of literary reputation by the only thing that can ever make any of us truly “secure”: love.

Sanderson sits across from me in an empty restaurant looking more at home in a graphic T-shirt and ill-fitting blazer than I have ever felt in my Aeropostale habiliments.¹⁰ He says that he wears this get-up based on the advice of his sister, whom he consulted due to his own complete lack of fashion sense. “She suggested I wear a blazer over my graphic tees, because it could be kind of unique and brandable,” Sanderson explains. “And because it might make me look more like a professor,” he adds with a shy smile. But Sanderson knows that he doesn’t look like a professor. Not really. And he is ok with that. In fact, Sanderson is one of the most “ok” people I’ve ever met, and I find myself wanting more and more to know why and how.

¹⁰ This is not a dig at Jason. This is straight self-insert. I swaddle myself in Aeropostale. That’s the way it is, and that’s the way that it will almost certainly remain.

Sanderson's wife is there with us, and I quickly learn that she is his biggest fan, always his first reader. In fact, the couple tells me about their first date. Sanderson laughs at himself as he recounts how on that date he laid out his entire vast scheme for the dozens of interconnected books and worlds that he's still busy writing today in the form of his "Cosmere." "When she went out with me a second time after that, I knew she was the one," he chuckles.

I decide that the question of Sanderson's simultaneous massive popularity and relative obscurity is something I should table for now. The answer, I decide, is more likely to come unasked for than to come consciously from Sanderson himself.

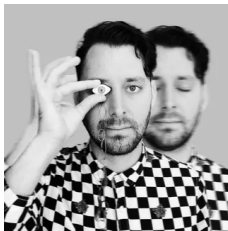
This is, of course, nothing more than a facsimile of truly "intuiting" Sanderson at all. I'm only imagining this encounter, cobbling something together out of Jason's account and other things I know about Sanderson. I'm merely meeting my imagined intuition of Sanderson, and imagining someone is simply giving a construct of them to myself—it is not receiving them as they give themselves to me at all. Nonetheless, I hope that the above rewriting is suggestive of the intuition that Jason might have received if he had borne a different intention towards Sanderson. And, at the very least, I had a great time writing it, and that counts for something (to me, at any rate).

Intending Towards Jason Kehe

But how does this help me make progress towards my stated intention of loving Jason Kehe? It might appear that I am making little to no progress on that front, and indeed up to this point that is probably true. However, I have begun to do something that might count as a shaky start. In what I wrote before rewriting Kehe's account of meeting Sanderson, I began to imaginatively enter into the experience of Jason himself. I began to intend towards Jason. And that is what I will do now, at greater length.

Let's begin with something a bit parallel to the above passage of intuiting Brandon Sanderson. Let's begin with Jason Kehe's appearance and general public presentation in the form of his staff picture and bio found on the WIRED website.

Here's the picture:



And here's the bio:

"Jason Kehe certainly does something. He definitely lives somewhere."

Now, I'm going to be honest here. If I were to allow myself to intend towards the above information, particularly the photo, with the intention with which I *want* to intend (one shaped by my outrage on behalf of Sanderson and ordinary, kind, "flyover" folks in general) I could really

build a magnificent mountain of mockery out of this rich little molehill.¹¹ But I'm not going to do that. I'm instead going to try to intend towards Jason in the same way that I tried, above, to intend towards Brandon Sanderson. I'm going to do my best (and my best is going to be extremely hampered by my foibles and prejudices) to encounter him as a thing-to-be-loved.

So then, with those glasses thus firmly set over the eyes of my heart: what do I see?

I see a man with an undeniably pretentious photo. But so what? That's a mere gloss on the surface, and to mistake the gloss for the thing-in-itself would be a catastrophic error indeed. That is only the beginning. The intuition is only starting to unfold. I see a man with a sense of humor. Look at the little smile on his lips—it is perhaps tinged with irony, undermined slightly by a lingering sense of lurid self-satirization, but there could be a real playfulness there too. Or so it seems to me as I intuit the image, lingering on it, attending to it as I might to the face of a stranger on a bus.¹² And there's creativity there too, coupled with that half-hidden humor, in the wooden eye he cheekily holds in front of his real one. The humor shows up again in his cheeky bio, where he playfully subverts the expectations for a biographical note. Is that too a bit pretentious? It could be. But nothing is only one thing. It's also genuinely funny and kind of charming. And perhaps more than that. Could his elusiveness here hint at something else? My imagination, beginning to become overexcited, latches onto the idea of the double. Why two Jason's? Could it be an expression of a sort of split, of a dimly felt sense of repression? Is the Jason who smiles, the one who ought to be laughing at his own dumb jokes and who perhaps does so some of the time, maybe most of the time, maybe all of the time when he is not operating in whatever cultural-critic mode seems to animate a certain sector of his professional persona, seeking to cast off the shackles of performativity and grin for real?

¹¹ I mean, I genuinely didn't know it was possible to imbue a single photograph with this much post-post-ironic, San Francisco snobbery-esque pretentiousness. His shirt seems to be harboring contrary ambitions of being an M.C. Escher painting and a hotel-lobby floor. He is holding...a fake eye in front of his real eye? A statement on the subjectivity of perception? A sly wink-and-nod to the illusory nature of "representation"? God only knows. And then, of course, there's the fact that we've got two Jason Kehe's for the price of one here. The second Jason seems to be in a sort of tranquil trance. Perhaps the tranquil Jason is his soul, at peace beside his embodied form, likely due to vast quantities of expensive yoga. Overall, it's hard not to feel that Jason is the sort of person who is embarrassed of his grandmother because she thinks Minions are fun.¹⁴

¹² Yes, this is a thing that I do, and I have made a fair number of strangers on busses uncomfortable when they glance up to find a thin, somewhat solemn young man contemplating their face. However, I am and intend to remain an unapologetic bus-face-starer because there is nothing more magical than letting the otherness of another human being wash over you and change you and burn your eyes clean. Furthermore, even if the only thing these people ever knowingly receive from me is slight discomfort, I believe there is something that, without knowing, they somehow receive from me when I am able, for a single flickering moment, to love them not as an abstraction but as a concrete glimmer of a whirling world as rich and resplendent as the one that blazes within me.

But more than all of these playful speculations I am struck, almost like a blow to the chest, by the sheer reality of this person who is absolutely other than me and who is every bit as alive as I am.¹³

That's the real takeaway. All the imagining about who and what Jason Kehe might be is (or at least should be) little more than a means to this end of recognizing not what I know about Jason but rather what I do *not* know.¹⁴ I have a handful of clues here in Jason's photo and bio, but this amounts to nothing more than a momentary glimpse through Jason's keyhole. But it's enough to make me aware of how much more there is to see. So I'll keep looking.

I am sorely tempted to do more rewriting of Jason's piece on Brando Sando because I really like imaginatively and lovingly intuiting Brandon Sanderson. It's easy. I like Brandon Sanderson. Lovingly intuiting Jason Kehe is hard (hence my persistent failure). I don't like him. Not yet, at any rate, or at least not most of the time. But that's why I've got to press on.

So I will be looking more at Jason's writing about Brandon Sanderson, but I will be doing so not primarily to seek a better understanding of Brandon Sanderson (for that purpose you'd be far better served by consulting Brando Sando than by consulting me) but rather to seek a better understanding of Jason Kehe in the way that I wish he had sought a better understanding of Brando Sando.

Towards this end, let's take a look-see at a passage midway through the think-piece.¹⁵

¹³ I would probably say something about Levinas here (and Levinas's account of the demand exerted upon us by the face of the Other) if I actually understood Levinas on more than a superficial level, but Levinas (appropriately perhaps) remains a mystery to me.

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Marion brilliantly explores the Other as what he terms a "saturated phenomenon" in much of his work, but especially in *The Erotic Phenomenon*. Marion argues that a saturated phenomenon is one which overwhelms any intention we might try to bear towards it, and we can see this in play in my own encounter even with the unspeaking photograph of Jason Kehe. I begin with the gleanings of my intention, examining the intuition that comes to light through the lens of that intention I choose to bear towards Jason, but in the end the sheer reality of Jason's face (his eyes most of all) melt away all my imaginings with the cold shock of his subjectivity.¹⁸

¹⁵ A brief aside to note some of the content that Jason sails past, merely making brief note of it before seemingly setting it aside as yet more insufficiently interesting or exciting material about Brandon Sanderson: "The concept of a vacation confuses Sanderson, he once said, because for him the perfect vacation is more time to write—vocation as vacation. His schedule is budgeted down to the minute, months out, to maximize the time he spends, rather counter-ergonomically, on the couch, typing away. Most days, he wakes up at 1 pm, exercises, and writes for four hours. Break for the wife and kids. Then he writes for four more. After that he plays video games or whatever until 5 am. A powerful sleeping pill is all that works, finally, to get him, and the voices in his head, to shut up." The man plays videogames until 5 am on the regular! He is passionate about his work almost to the point of neurosis! But this, apparently, is not "exciting" to Jason. Later information about Sanderson's "evil villain lair" and desire to feel through his characters bafflingly falls into this same category of "lameness."

For now, the fans, even the turned-away ones, are in unconquerable spirits. As is typically the case at these things, there's a general air—warmish, body-odored—of unselfconsciousness. By my rough count, some three-quarters of the attendees are men, boys, menboys, blurring together in a mass of pale, fleshy nerdery in Sanderson-appropriate graphic tees. The women, fewer in number, tend to be the better cosplayers. Lots of billowing cloaks, spritely makeups, precious weapons. (There's an arena for refereed fights.) If you don't come prepared, never fear, because the sprawl of purchasable Sandersonalia is endless: art, clothes, figurines, games, jewelry, ornaments, special-edition books, a letter opener (not available yet) in the style of a telepathic sword named Nightblood.¹⁶

I talk to as many of the fans as I can, some in their teens, others in their sixties, from here in Utah and as far away as India, Norway, Australia. They're sweet. Many of them have been reading Sanderson since the beginning, since *Elantris*. A teenage girl announces, "I'm here basically because I'm a huge nerd!" Everyone is smiling, sharing info and panel gossip. One guy from Massachusetts tells me he just spent \$170 on a rubber sword (not Nightblood; this one is called Mayalaran). It's bigger than he is; he won't be able to take it on the plane home. Another guy, 41 years old, tells me he made his sword (Firestorm; they *all* have names) himself. It took more than a year, on and off, to design, and then six weeks to 3D-print. I see a young couple with very young kids. "Are you indoctrinating them into this fantasyland?" I ask, gesturing to the stroller. "Trying to," the dad says.

Hoo boy. Admittedly—not a great look for Jason. Not even a good look. It is, in fact, a bad look. I am genuinely baffled how someone who writes for WIRED of all places can harbor such a thinly veiled disgust for "nerds" (e.g. "men, boys, menboys," "a mass of pale, fleshy nerdery in Sanderson-appropriate graphic tees"). And what on earth was Jason expecting at a con? Did he expect the attendees of a Brandon Sanderson convention to *not* be enthusiastic Brando Sando fans? It is altogether quite puzzling.

However, if I rigorously apply my intending-towards-Jason-as-a-thing-to-love lens, some hints of something else begin to appear. Most have read Jason's description of Sanderson's fans

¹⁶ Ok, I couldn't resist doing a little bit of empathetic rewriting.

Right now, the fans, even those who couldn't get in, are in unconquerable spirits. As is typically the case at these things, there's a general air—warmish, open—of unselfconsciousness. I sense somehow that many of the cheering and grinning people around me are shy, perhaps closed off in most social situations—but almost no one here is closed off today. By my rough count, some three-quarters of the attendees are male, a diverse array of boys and men all united by their Sanderson-appropriate graphic tees. The women, fewer in number, tend to be the better cosplayers. Lots of billowing cloaks, spritely makeups, and intricate weapons. (There's an arena for refereed fights.) If you don't come prepared, never fear, because the sprawl of purchasable Sandersonalia is endless: art, clothes, figurines, games, jewelry, ornaments, special-edition books, a letter opener (not available yet) in the style of a telepathic sword named Nightblood.

as universally scornful, and I agree that his tone overall is unpardonably sneering. However, even in my first reading of his article, I read his description overall as perhaps a bit more ambivalent than most people seem to have found it. It seems to me almost as if he is, unbeknownst to himself, conflicted. The second paragraph of this section (if it weren't for what comes before and after) could really be read as affectionate and impressed almost as easily as it could be read as bemusedly mocking. And consider this fragment here: "Lots of billowing cloaks, spritely makeups, precious weapons." It's as if Jason almost got through this sentence without recoiling into ironic smirking. "Billowing cloaks"—fine. "Spritely makeup"—alright. But then "precious weapons," and the smirking Jason with the fake eye is back to the fore.

Yes, that's just it actually! That, I think, is the best way to read this passage and Jason's piece in general—as an ongoing battle between two Jason's, the two Jason's prefigured in Jason Kehe's staff profile picture.¹⁷ On the one hand, we have the smirking and ironic Jason with his fake eye—the Jason whom I will from this point on refer to as Kehe. On the other hand, we have the second Jason, the smiling Jason—whom I will from this point on refer to as Jason.

It's Kehe vs. Jason.

And how do we see this fight playing out? Well, one thing is clear; in the end, Kehe wins. But Jason is still there—weak perhaps in comparison to his rival, but just as real for all that. Consider, for instance, a somewhat striking claim that Jason/Kehe makes at the beginning of the passage above: "As is typically the case at these things, there's a general air—warmish, body-odored—of unselfconsciousness." Most readers have read this line as straightforwardly mean, and ultimately they might be right. But how does this read if we simply remove the m-dash insertion "warmish, body-odored"? Is the claim of "unselfconsciousness" actually a bad thing, *per se*? As I've tried to capture in footnote 20, I don't think it is. Self-consciousness (outside the realm of metaphysics) is not seen as a good thing—far from it. We generally think of it as a condition to be avoided, something from which we flee. Most seem to have read "unselfconscious" as an insult, like "lacking self-awareness," and it is natural to take it that way due to the insertion of the random petty insults. But what if the insertion is best understood¹⁸ as the voice of Kehe interjecting itself into the thought of Jason? What if Kehe's inveterate snideness disrupts what might otherwise have been an observation displaying a quality that is sorely lacking in Jason's/Kehe's article overall (i.e. actual thoughtfulness)?

It feels almost as if Jason is just beginning to tentatively grope towards something he does not quite understand only to have Kehe, faux-eyeball in hand, shatter his reflections with pointless mockery. And then again there's the description of the cosplaying where what could have been simple (even somewhat admiring) description takes on a sneering tone with the word "precious"? If I am to stay true to my project of coming closer to loving Jason, how can I best make sense of this?

I think that the word "unselfconscious" is the key. The petty vindictiveness of Kehe's insertion ("warmish, body-odored") suggests to me a kind of recoiling. Is it fear? Disgust? I don't think it's quite either, and I don't think it is the body-odor at which Kehe is recoiling. It is

¹⁷ After all, Jason seems to have intended for his photo to be a "work of art" of some sort, and what is art for if not to be overanalyzed?

¹⁸ It is worth noting that I do not consider "best understood as" to be synonymous with "most likely to be true."

the unselfconsciousness itself at which Kehe is recoiling, and I believe he recoils not out of fear or disgust but out of envy, because what quality could Jason/Kehe possibly embody more than *self-consciousness*? He is a man who interprets all the world around him through the claustrophobically narrow lens of the “exciting” and “publishable.” His very staff photo suggests that he is a man who experiences himself as split. He lives as himself watching himself and aware of being watched by both himself and others. Living life while fearing that others are watching you in the same way you are watching them, for Jason would mean constant, unending judgment of everything from his appearance to his clothes to how he prefers to enjoy his own food. And, others aside, there is also at least one person judging Jason at all times—Kehe/himself.¹⁹

Now my hypothesis might at this stage sound a bit farfetched, but I think I can lend some authority to my reading of Jason Kehe by looking ahead to one of the most perplexing passages in this extraordinarily perplexing article. I am referring to the moment, towards the end, at which Jason finds himself crying in Brandon Sanderson’s basement:

I do cry the next night, my last in Utah. We’re down in Sanderson’s below-ground movie theater, in plush red-leather seats that not only recline but also have adjustable headrests. He wants to show the specs off, so he plays the opening scene of *The Greatest Showman*. I don’t tell him that, while I like musicals, I hate *The Greatest Showman*, and especially Hugh Jackman. The scene starts. The chair shakes with otherworldly sound. When Hugh, lame Hugh, opens his mouth to sing, I can’t help it. I burst into tears.

What’s happening to me? This story isn’t coming together. To my mind, I still haven’t gotten anything *real* from Sanderson, anything true. I’m not the first person he has toured around his lair to politely gawk at his treasures and trophies and his hallway of custom stained-glass renditions of his favorite books (Tolkien, Harry Potter, [The Belgariad](#)). I’m certainly not the first person he has told about one favorite book in particular, Barbara Hambly’s [Dragonsbane](#), which an English teacher put in his hands when he was 14, probably the day he became a fantasy writer. Or how he first got published. Or about the phone call he got from Robert Jordan’s widow, asking if he might finish the *Wheel of Time* series. These stories are all over the internet, on his website and many others. Sanderson has lived so much of his life and fame openly, self-promotionally. It’s a major reason

¹⁹ Would it be going too far to speculate that this disjunct between heightened self-consciousness and comparative unselfconsciousness holds true, to a degree, between urban coastal culture and rural/suburban middle America in general? Or perhaps the divide is, more accurately, generational—dividing those acculturated by social media from those who have not been thus malformed. After all, social media involves not only a constant, conscious creation of one’s own identity but also a kind of bird’s-eye perspective on that identity.²⁴ We were not previously able to scroll through a concrete inscription of our others-facing persona, evaluating and critiquing our every word, every smile, every outfit in retrospect with such precision. It is perhaps exactly this mindset from which Sanderson fans are liberated not only at his cons but also in reading his work (“escapism” in the rich and positive sense developed by Tolkien in “On Fairy Stories”). And it is perhaps this liberation that Jason Kehe envies.

for his success. One woman I talked to at the con made sure to tell me which of Sanderson's *pets* was her favorite. It's Jello, the parrot.

After I recover from Hugh in 4D, Sanderson collects his 15-year-old, and we all drive to dinner. This time the food is better: Utah Japanese. Sanderson and I order ramen. He salts his. Then I watch his son salt his yakisoba. I could cry again. Instead, I ask Sanderson if he's ever so moved by a scene he writes that *he* cries. Sometimes, he says. Though it might not be the scenes people expect.

At the beginning of the second paragraph, Jason asks: "What's happening to me?" And he then carries on as if what is coming might eventually help to explain why Jason Kehe, despite his apparently inveterate hatred of "lame" Hugh Jackman, weeps in Brando Sando's theater room. But he never does answer this question. He doesn't even try. He pivots to what he, for some random reason, considers to be the only interesting thing Sanderson says to him, this being Sanderson's remark (after a lot of prodding from Justin) about how his faith influences his creative work: "As I build books, God builds people."²⁰ We never get any real explanation at all of why Jason cries (and not just a little bit, he "burst[s] into tears").

I am going to endeavor now to offer an explanation for this mysterious moment. It seems to me that in this brief tearful incident in Sanderson's basement we see Jason, for one poignant moment, in a way that he himself does not even remotely understand, gain the ascendancy over Kehe. Surely it is Kehe who wrinkles his nose at the very mention of Hugh Jackman, who looks askance at the popular but critically disliked *The Greatest Showman*, who scrutinizes the salting habits of Sanderson and his son. And surely it is Jason who cryptically cries. I don't think it is primarily the influence of Hugh that breaks down Jason's walls of self-scrutinizing irony. Nor is it the impressive quality of Sanderson's screen and speaker system.²¹ I think, as Jason himself seems vaguely aware, that it is the influence of Sanderson himself.

Jason has just spent several days experiencing the outpouring of Brando Sando's hospitality (just good old fashioned American heartland style generosity) all the while harboring scorn in his heart. And now he's sitting in the basement of this man whom (as he says again and again throughout the piece) he simply cannot understand and watching him *enjoy* something in a way that Jason himself cannot enjoy that thing (and perhaps in a way that he cannot really enjoy anything at all). Brando Sando likes *The Greatest Showman*. He's free to like it because he likes it. He isn't constrained by the bonds of social expectation by which Kehe constantly appraises and judges Justin. Brando Sando is free.

And consider the lyrics of the opening song of *The Greatest Showman*, the lyrics that prompt Jason's honest tears:

²⁰ In fact, Kehe's interpretation of Sanderson's comment "As I build books, God builds people" is misguided due to the combination of Kehe's ignorance of the Christian doctrine of the *imago dei* (borrowed in a distorted form by Mormonism), his ignorance of the longstanding idea in theistic literary theory of literary creation as an imitative act of sub-creation, and his painfully obvious bias against Mormons (e.g. "50 some people/Mormons strong").²⁷

²¹ I conclude this partly due to Jason's description of his own almost equally impressive tv setup in this article here: <https://www.wired.com/story/no-one-knows-how-to-watch-movies/>

Ladies and gents, this is the moment you've waited for (whoa)
Been searching in the dark, your sweat soaking through the floor (whoa)
And buried in your bones there's an ache that you can't ignore
Taking your breath, stealing your mind
And all that was real is left behind

Don't fight it, it's coming for you, running at ya
It's only this moment, don't care what comes after
Your fever dream, can't you see it getting closer
Just surrender 'cause you feel the feeling taking over
It's fire, it's freedom, it's flooding open
It's a preacher in the pulpit and your blind devotion
There's something breaking at the brick of every wall, it's holding
All that you know
So tell me, do you wanna go?

This song could well be taken as an invitation to feel all the things that Jason Kehe will not allow himself to feel. It's a call to cast off social pretension, to shrug aside denials, and to give yourself the freedom to enjoy what you enjoy—regardless of what you're told you *should* enjoy.

And here's my claim, speculative though it might be. Jason Kehe likes Brandon Sanderson—in every possible sense. He likes Sanderson's work. He has read, by his own admission, *17 Brandon Sanderson novels*. No one else at his workplace even knows who Brandon Sanderson is.²² According to Kehe, he has seen absolutely no literary tastemaker advocating for the worth of Sanderson's work.²³ So why then did Jason keep reading past book one? Or book two? Or book twelve? Because he freaking likes it! Obviously. It's as plain as the nose on my face. But Kehe won't let Jason admit this, not even to himself. He keeps looking for an explanation purportedly of Brandon Sanderson's broader popularity, but really he's seeking for an explanation for this aberration within himself, this intrusion of the authentic into his cautiously sculpted simulacrum of himself.

And, what is more, Jason Kehe likes Brando Sando himself—the man, the sportscoat/graphic tee-wearing, ramen-salting, word-bleeding madman who wanted to share his theater with a snippy young journalist for no reason other than being excited to share something that he really enjoys with someone else whom he hopes might enjoy it too. Jason tries to purge that reality from himself and from his writing, but it leaks out all the same, lurking palimpsestuously²⁴ behind his smirking irony.

Jason Kehe bursts into tears because Jason Kehe wants to be free. Free of himself, free of Kehe, free to like things because he likes them, free to love people because he loves them, free to

²² If true, this is really weird.

²³ Only true if one defines “literary tastemakers” very narrowly.

²⁴ I sincerely apologize for using this word. The sad truth is that it lives rent-free in my mind due to my immersion in the world of literary academia. It's been a hip and stylish word/concept in that cloistered universe for several years now, and I fear it might soon leak out into broader society, just as the word “liminal” has tragically already done. May God forgive me for my contribution to this outcome.

wear cheesy cosplay and ill-fitting sports coats and his heart on his sleeve. The reality of Brando Sando, the sheer weight of the intuition of that caring and awkward and real human being, is bearing down upon Jason Kehe's paltry, confining intention, and Jason wants to let it in.

But he can't. Not quite. He reverts to his Kehe ways and vaguely locates the site of his discomfiture in Sanderson's Mormon theology. But, just for a moment, through the voice of Hugh Jackman, that rich reality from which Jason Kehe has cut himself off breaks through and touches his heart.

And I wish that I could meet Jason Kehe in person, not merely in my imagining like this, not merely as a construct of my own mind, but in the flesh, perhaps seated across from him at a restaurant of his choosing, eating San Francisco Chinese whatever that might mean, and listening to him (really listening to him) with all of the attention that I can muster, intending towards him as a thing-to-be-loved, catching glimpses here and there of his ever-so-singular self (like sitting in the darkness at night and waiting for the rare moments when a firefly lets itself glow and show), inching incrementally closer to knowing him even as the reality of his ultimate unknowability is impressed upon me, until finally I can look him in the eye and say, with gentle conviction: "Bro. It's alright."