

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

# OU alumnus makes a splash with epic environmental novel

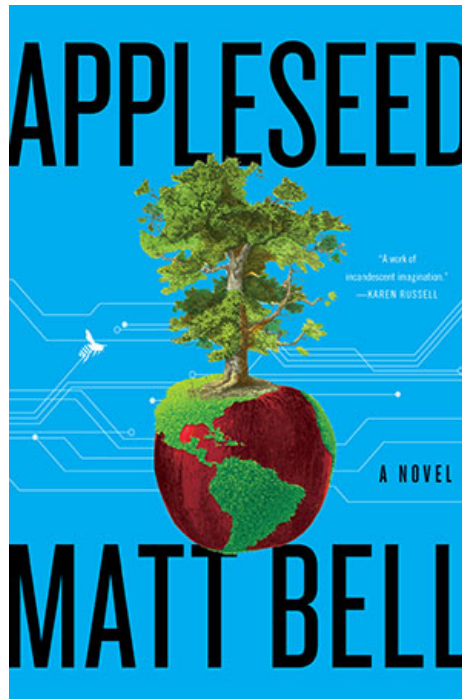


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Matt Bell, a 2006 graduate of Oakland University's English program, recently released his novel "[Appleseed](#)" to critical acclaim. The book traces three storylines across a thousand years, including a mythological retelling of the Johnny Appleseed folktale, a harrowing struggle against climate change-driven corporate control and the travails of a bioengineered creature searching for the last vestiges of civilization.

Published by Custom House in July, the novel was named a "Best Book of Summer" by The New York Times, USA Today, Esquire, Philadelphia Inquirer, Literary Hub and Goodreads. Along with garnering rave reviews, it was a New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice, Indies Next List Pick and Amazon Book of the Month for July. Bell gleaned inspiration for the book from his lifelong love of nature and keen interest in global environmental issues.

"It's a story about manifest destiny and the climate crisis, about how we got here and about how people in the future might try to solve the environmental and culture problems we've made," [Bell wrote on his website](#). He describes the novel as "a mythological epic, technological thriller (and) big adventure story set in the past, present and future."



Bell's oeuvre includes poems, essays, short stories and books, many of which have found wide audiences – something Bell ascribes to writing about his own interests.

"I really believe you just have to write the sort of books you want to write," said Bell, a native of rural Hemlock, Michigan. "If you move toward your own excitement and joy, other people will recognize that. It's cheering to me that this really weird book is connecting with other people and they are deeply engaging with the ideas in the book. Writing is so solitary, but when you publish, then ideally it becomes a conversation."

For Bell, finding a voice through writing has proved a years-long endeavor. He was always a voracious reader and dabbled in science fiction writing as a middle schooler. In his early 20s, he began reading contemporary literary fiction.

“It kind of lit me up again,” he recalled. “I started writing the kind of short stories that I liked to read.”

At the time, Bell had recently dropped out of college where he had been pursuing a degree in computer science. He decided to switch to English and enrolled at OU after attending a summer writing conference hosted by the university.

“I was so impressed by the professors, especially Annie Gilson when I heard her speak there. I thought maybe I’ll go study with these people,” he said. “I was really fortunate to have that preview of what the program was like and have it be such a good home for me.”

Bell took numerous writing workshops at OU and found many kindred spirits who helped him cultivate his writing talents.

“I wrote the first thing I ever published in the cafeteria of the student union, so I have a lot of good memories,” he said. “I think OU has a great writing program where the professors are really invested in their students. Some of the people I worked with are still there, like Annie Gilson, Kevin Grimm and Kitty Dubin. They took me really seriously and I learned a lot in their classes. I also met other students who were writing really well.”

Gilson, now in her 22nd year at OU, remembers Bell as “a brilliant writer even as an undergrad and one of the hardest workers I’ve ever met.”

“He’s always been kind and generous, but he’s also a person who loves to sit down and talk. He really helped us to build a sense of community among undergrads,” Gilson said. “He continues to do that now, helping to build community among U.S. writers and readers, both as a writer and as someone who cheers other writers on. He puts out a [free monthly newsletter](#) where he champions other writers and offers writing exercises to anyone who wants them. Such a great inspiration to all of us, and of course we are all so happy and proud to have known him way back when.”

After graduating from OU, Bell earned an MFA in creative writing from Bowling Green State University and briefly worked for an Ann Arbor-based publisher before becoming an assistant professor of creative writing at Northern Michigan University. In 2014, he left for Arizona State University where he is currently an associate professor of creative writing.

“Everything I do in the classroom is very process-oriented,” Bell said. “I try to leave students with ways of thinking and ways of working that will be useful to them no matter what kind of books they’re writing. One of the best things teaching has done for me is require me to read widely to understand where my students are coming from, which has made me a better writer and teacher.”

He also strives to invigorate students by showing them the same level of care he received at Oakland.

“At my university, we talk a lot about how students succeed when they feel like they have strong relationships with faculty, and that was certainly the case for me at OU,” said Bell. “I was really lucky to have professors who took an interest in me and genuinely cared about the things I was trying to do. That made me want to be there and work hard to succeed.”

Amid the hoopla surrounding “Appleseed,” Bell is working on his next book, “[Refuse to Be Done](#),” a practical guide to novel-writing due out March 2022. He will speak at OU this February to celebrate the 10th anniversary of OU's [creative writing program](#). Additionally, this fall, the university will welcome poet [Mary Ann Samyn](#), professor of English in the MFA in creative writing program at West Virginia University.

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