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A Deeper Look into Sown in Earth with Fred Arroyo



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Sown in Earth is a collection of personal memories that speak to the larger experiences of hardworking

migratory men. Often forgotten or silenced, these men are honored and remembered in *Sown in Earth* through the lens of Fred Arroyo's memories of his father. By crafting a written journey through childhood traumas, poverty, and the impact of alcoholism on families, Fred Arroyo clearly outlines how his lived experiences led him to become a writer.

Below, Fred has answered a few questions that shed more light on the process and thoughts behind writing *Sown in Earth*.

This collection of essays is deeply personal and, at times, traumatic. How do you approach and process writing about topics that require you to be vulnerable?

That vulnerability is at the heart of almost everything I write. I can think of no other way to go about it. There is a desire, want, or yearning that drives my writing, and often that has to do with some kind of wound. Hurt. Loss. Psychic wound. In writing *Sown in Earth* I made a point of not using the word *añoranza*, which in Spanish relates to yearning, longing, and nostalgia— though it is a difficult word to translate or define in English because it's much more than these other words or qualities. The longing and yearning of *añoranza* are tied to a deep need to return to a place. Maybe, in the mind, to be *sown in earth*. When I write, I don't set about to approach this *añoranza* or loss; it is there in the form of

mood, an atmosphere of meditation and exploration, a space where I might discover aspects of a vulnerability I would not have realized without writing. As far back as I can remember, I've always been looking from the outside in. Given periods of sadness and depression, I am often inhabited by the "blues", and that's clearly an essential part of my poetics. What was it that Federico Garcia Lorca said, "I am neither all poet, all man or leaf, but only the pulse of a wound that probes the opposite side."? You have to be open, without a purpose or agenda when writing about certain memories and situations, if you want to discover the other side of the wound, something new about the memory or situation.

*In *Sown in Earth*, you write "Ever since I discovered things can be beautiful because of the care I take to see them..." Was this a sudden discovery, or a gradual shift in your worldview? How has it impacted your writing?*

From the very beginning of my writing, if añoranza or loss existed, lyricism and a sense of beauty existed as well. My lyricism had always been unbridled though, passage after passage, flights that seem to soar without end. This lyricism often got in the way of a "story", others would say. More to the point is that I have a particular way of looking at the world, and that makes for a different kind of story. The passage quoted in the question came about through a gradual discovery. I started to think of beauty and writing in terms of space,

I suppose like sculpture, a library, or a field, about how you have to carefully mold or cultivate a space for beauty. And there was something about where you stood, or from what angle you looked at things. So if you were always walking in a field from one direction that only allowed you to notice certain spaces, but if you found new ways to walk the field, and you were carefully attentive in your looking and listening, you might discover a new grove of birches on the edge of the field, hear a spring, feel the way a meadow rolled towards the fence line. I can recollect that much reading of John Berger and José Ortega y Gasset helped shape my view, but it was also a gradual recognition that a seemingly rural and “poor” life had just as much dignity, honor, and beauty as any painting or sculpture in a museum. Or a book on a library shelf. And it was up to me to figure out how to create a space that allowed that life to exist in a way where others would recognize this life. A space of memory and imagination where others could recognize its dignity and beauty within their own lives.

Would you please discuss the balance between forgiveness and accountability when writing pieces about your childhood and your father?

I suppose I’m beholden to the notation that *character is fate*. Or in fiction writing, character is everything. I love the notion of *energeia*, that is, the possibility or

potential of story is discovered within a character and the situation. That guides my writing of fiction and nonfiction. I'm the narrator, I'm the sentient being present in the making of the world, and so I do hold the character or situation to a kind of accountability. But not much. I think of people or characters like quicksilver— they have a spontaneity, a wild side, an unpredictability and chaos that's not easy to control. What's more important in the writing is the forgiveness. You cannot discover the gift of the past, a person, or a situation if you can't approach it with openness, vulnerability, and forgiveness. Writing can create or offer *islands of repair*, as I wrote in *Sown in Earth* because I loved that phrase by Henry Miller.

I didn't really think of writing *Sown in Earth* as a way to create accountability, or to "stop" or "recapture" time. I felt that way because I envision memory as material, and a force, moving through time and space. As a material phenomenon, memory can be held, shaped (parts discarded, parts held close), and re-made given where the material and force— like a creek, a watch, a knife, a name— takes you. I couldn't have written this book if I didn't discover how to forgive the past. More urgently: I couldn't have written the book if I didn't forgive myself for what I remembered. It was through this forgiveness that I discovered a lost self, peoples and places I might have forgotten, that I discovered sources

of life, story, and spirit that could be vividly brought to life on the page. Always in my mind was Ortega y Gasset's notion that an essay is a meditation, and borrowing from Spinoza, Ortega y Gasset wrote that at the heart of a meditation is amor itellectualis. I like to run from the things having to do with intellect as fast as I can, and yet I kept this feeling close in writing meditations of forgiveness, meditations of love.

In one essay, you write, "...or should I write, in memory, that he's my uncle by blood?" I think this explores the fallibility of memory in an interesting way. Could you please discuss the role that misremembering, whether subconscious or intentional, plays in writing a memoir? Do you think that memoirs, by default, have unreliable narrators?

Even though I suggested that memory is material, that it has an existence and force that is not simply found in the "past", my memory is continually shaped by my imagination. Misremembering is present for sure. My memories, for example, are clearly shaped by my becoming a writer, so that the process of writing, the reading of books, words, and passages by writers, shape my memory, shape how I imagine certain memories. That has to create some form of selection and misremembering. And yet, at the same time, each memory in this writing is a glimpse and a seed, an image, scene, event, or experience I can't deny. Involuntarily, without my doing anything, certain

memories speak to me, flash and shudder within, invigorate the five senses, and make me pay attention. I assume everyone has this kind of memory writing within them. Though I have a sense, again, it also has something to do in particular with imagining yourself as a writer— and that’s why I admire the power of memory for writers like Vladimir Nabokov, Jean Rhys, Patrick Modiano, or Anne Michaels. How the language of memory shapes their writing selves. So I’m trying to say that I’m not sure “memoirs, by default, have unreliable narrators.” They exist, for sure. But for me you are striving to be as reliable as a person, irrespective of factual truth, because memory has its own language and emotion that cannot be denied.

In discovering this writing self, I’m often struck by how my best self is present— or, as Kristjana Gunnars proposes, a stranger has entered into my writing room and helped me to discover my writing in ways I am most grateful for. I would say this stranger or best writing self strives for a great amount of reliability because there’s a strong presence of authority and vulnerability in the moment.

What are you working on now?

I wish I knew. On paper I have a half a dozen stories for a collection of short fictions, *The Book of Manuels*, that I continue to return to, and in these stories various

characters named “Manuel” are present, the stories have something to do with manual labor, a manual or a book, and they dramatize the power of sight (as in Immanuel: one with ideals, one who can see), and the conflicts of perception. I envision these stories as also being containers of fictional consciousness meditating on a lack of empathy for the working-class, and how their lives and stories continue to be marginalized— if not erased— from American culture and society. Also, I’ve written some 40 poems that I imagine as becoming a manuscript, *Before Birches Blue*. I’m still kind of haunted by writing *Sown in Earth*. I’m taking things slow in terms of writing. I can’t seem to take a break or stop writing, however. Whenever I finish a book, I always seem to mull over how I failed, what I didn’t accomplish, what I might have done better, no matter that when I finished I knew it was my best at the moment. I supposed this is why *The Region of Lost Names*, *Western Avenue and Other Fictions*, and *Sown in Earth: Essays of Memory and Belonging* are in line with each other, create patterns across genres, peoples, and places. Maybe they are all a part of one big book. So I’m finding I have all these new essays to write, and wondering where they will take me, what I might discover, and how they might help me to get the writing right.

Fred Arroyo is



the author of *Sown in Earth: Essays of Memory and Belonging, Western Avenue and Other Fictions*, and *The Region of Lost Names: A Novel*. A recipient of an Individual Artist Program

Grant from the Indiana Arts Commission, Arroyo's fiction is a part of the Library of Congress series Spotlight on U.S. Hispanic Writers. Arroyo's writing is also included in *Camino del Sol: Fifteen Years of Latina and Latino Writing* and *The Colors of Nature: Essays on Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*. In the past decade Arroyo has driven considerable miles along the northern border of the United States, particularly in Ontario, Quebec, and the maritime regions, where he's camped, walked, canoed, and fished in a real and imagined North Country that's influencing a new collection of short stories and a book of poems. Arroyo is an assistant professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University.