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Interlitq's Californian Poets Interview Series

Your upcoming novel is scheduled to be released in May 2022. Without divulging too much, can you give readers a glimpse into the project and possibly also discuss the inspiration behind the work?

The easiest way to answer your first question is to quote the so-called tag-line for the book: “In the fast-paced, sexy, and very scary literary thriller *Ursula Lake*, a husband and wife trying to save their marriage and a rock musician trying to get his career back on track find big trouble, natural and possibly supernatural, in British Columbia’s spellbinding wilds.”

The book was inspired by several fishing trips I took into northern British Columbia back when I lived in Seattle. It’s gorgeous country, haunting and wild in every sense of the word—the perfect setting for the novel I wanted to write. The plot grew out of the characters, of course, but the setting, too.

Many writers have said that the difference between poetry and fiction is that the former is crafted with precision instruments while the latter requires hammers and wrenches. Why are such distinctions ultimately unhelpful and how did your work as a poet ultimately influence the direction of your prose?

Writing a good novel requires precision instruments as well as wrenches and sledgehammers. I prefer a running metaphor: sprint versus marathon. Poetry-writing skills can benefit prose, just as prose-writing skills can benefit poetry. I’ve tried to bring both skills to bear on *Ursula Lake*. I hope that my prose embodies poetic virtues such as rhythm, conciseness, strong imagery, and potent metaphor, just as I hope my poetry makes good use of the devices of narrative, not the least of which is entertainment value.

One of your crowning achievements was collecting and editing work for *Stand Up Poetry: An Expanded Anthology*. Readers will find no shortage of candid, powerful, and brave poems in these pages. Indeed, the anthology feels and reads like a response to much of the tepid “academic” verse written today. Was this your original intention, and, if so, what would you say is wrong with much of the work written today?

The Stand Up anthology, which has gone through three different editions, began as an attempt to collect poems which I felt sure that my undergraduate students at CSULB would enjoy. “The cardinal sin of art,” I tell my students, “is to bore.” Too many times, beginning readers of poetry find themselves befuddled and stupefied by the poems they come across, even in prestigious books and magazines. Veteran readers, including me, may also feel that way. This, needless to say, isn’t good for readers or writers of poetry. The three Stand Up anthologies were among my many attempts to return poetry to being a pleasure, not a chore. To make it, dare I say, fun.

Too much of the poetry being written today fails, it seems to me, to take into account the reader's pleasure or lack thereof. Except in writing workshops and submissions to one's mom, no writer is owed the reader's attention. Attention must be earned. Too many poets seem to forget this.

Very relevant to this discussion is your collection of essays about the state and craft of poetry, published in 2016, under the title *A Million MFAs Are Not Enough*. On one hand, the title seems to say it all—greater instruction of creative writing won't revitalize the essence of poetry; on the other hand, you've successfully taught craft and aesthetics to students who are now publishing their work in some of the best literary magazines, meaning there are benefits and advantages to this approach. In your view, what are the pros and cons of a degree practically non-existent in mainland Europe—the MFA?

The title of my book means to imply that a readership of poetry specialists, even a fairly large one, should not be the ultimate goal of poets and poetry. I have wanted, from my beginnings as a poet, to entice the "general reader" back to poetry.

Poets have to learn their craft, and a good MFA program can help serious students move forward, and save them years of trying to re-invent the wheel. Students should realize, though, that having an MFA doesn't guarantee a good teaching job, or any job at all. Nor can it turn every student, however diligent and well-meaning, into a Shakespeare, a Keats, or even a Colly Cibber. The MFA is simply one possible step on the road to possibly writing good poems.

Before embarking on a teaching career, you were a professional rock musician for over ten years. We've already discussed the similarities between poetry and prose, but music, despite being a different genre, seems to be even closer to poetry, mainly due to the former's melodic characteristics, which the latter has much in common with. It would be interesting to hear more about the nature of your musical career—how did the years of being on stage ultimately make you a better poet?

I think that music and poetry come from similar places in my psyche. My musical ability translates into what poets call "a good ear." That means I'm sensitive to what sounds good, whether music or poetry. Many of my poems have a propulsive rhythm that feels very rock-and-roll to me. I try to bring the same high energy to my poems that I brought to music.

As a professional musician, I learned the importance of exciting the audience, and giving them a good time. If a band fails to do that, they either don't work, or don't work for long. Poetry is a different story. Poetry which pleases almost no one can flourish in academia if a few influential academics champion it. Since there is a very limited market for poetry, there is no real trial-by-marketplace. A receptive audience has no chance to overrule the arbiters of taste, as can still happen with music and novel. (These arbiters of taste, by the way, often have very peculiar, or at least atypical tastes. I could write a whole essay about the reasons why.) My goal has always been to write poems of high literary value that simultaneously enlighten and entertain.

It's sensible to assume that music still dictates, to a large extent, the writing of your poetry. Is the same true for fiction, or do you gravitate towards something else?

I try to bring the same musical qualities to my prose as to my poetry. I want my fiction to possess high energy, and utilize language that can roar, whisper, and sing as it tells stories that give the reader excitement, emotional involvement, insight, and pleasure. In both poetry and fiction, I try to write books that I would like to read.

Will you continue focusing on fiction after the publication of your novel or will you return to poetry, and which one, for you, is more enjoyable to write, and which is more enjoyable to teach?

I plan to continue to write both poetry and fiction. Because I wrote only poems for so long, I have a buildup of fiction-energy that I'm currently using to fuel short stories and two new novels, as well as a collection of prose poems.

Poetry is more fun for me to write than fiction, because poems come out in an exciting rush and generally take less time to complete. The sprint versus the marathon. Also, if a poem fizzles, it doesn't cost me a year or more of my writing life. I find great satisfaction, though, in creating a whole world, as one can do in a novel and on a smaller scale, in a short story. I'm fascinated by the human psyche, and enjoy delving deeply into characters, watching a compelling story grow out of their interactions with each other and the world.