

Interview with Brian Henry

Front Porch: In an interview, you stated that you couldn't remember loving any poems until your senior year of high school. After your undergraduate work, you received an MFA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. How did the MFA program influence your writing, and do you feel it was a necessary step for your poetic development? What kind of poems would you be writing had you not completed an MFA program?

Brian Henry: The most important thing about doing an MFA was having the time to read—mainly poetry, but also fiction, criticism, theory, literary magazines, literary journalism—and to do so mostly on my own terms. I had to read for some classes, of course, but 90% of my reading was self-selected, which is a huge difference from my undergraduate experience, which was far more restrictive and of limited benefit to my writing. I also started editing *Verse* during my first year of graduate school, and in spring 1995, I read all the poems published by the magazine in its first 10 years, which exposed me to all kinds of stuff that wasn't really available in the States then: poetry by Scottish poets, English poets, Australian poets, New Zealand poets, Irish poets, Polish poets, French poets, and others whose work hadn't yet been published by American presses and was hard to find.

During graduate school, I was surrounded for the first time by other people who took poetry very seriously and gave up doing other things to work on their poetry. And of course I took workshops with poets (Dara Wier, James Tate, Agha Shahid Ali) whose own writing and examples proved illuminating.

I almost dropped out of graduate school after my first year, to pursue editing and freelance writing full-time, so if I had gone that route, I might be able to answer your question about how my writing would have developed if I hadn't gone to graduate school.

FP: You've gone from directing the undergraduate and the graduate program at the University of Georgia to developing the creative writing program at the University of Richmond. Needless to say, you've had quite a lot of experience with creative writing students, not to mention being one yourself. Many poets and critics have said that this academic dumbing-down of creative writing has produced an assembly-line effect. Do you feel the criticisms of creative writing programs are grounded in any truths? Do you consider any of this in your own pedagogical methods?

BH: There's certainly some truth to the not-so-various criticisms of creative writing programs. But what one person sees as a dumbing-down of poetry, another sees as the democratization of poetry. One thing creative writing programs offer is an entryway into the art that many people otherwise might not find, maybe because of family, educational, or class background. Creative writing programs also do a great job of exposing students to contemporary literature, which English Departments in general don't really do and aren't designed to do. And if students had to rely on Barnes & Noble or Borders, they'd be presented with a depressingly small menu. Online venues have changed that situation for the better, but beginning writers still need to find books and literary magazines if they're not in a community where they can share their work with others.

I think the benefits of creative writing programs far outweigh the negatives. I'd prefer having more writing in the world than less. Those who complain about there being too much poetry tend to be the same people who want to control what gets published and noticed, and of course they're trying to impose their aesthetics on the world at large. Everyone tries to do this, to some extent, but when so many people are doing it, the individual gate-keepers become less important, and I see that as a good thing. American poetry used to be so feudal, and that has changed quite a bit in the past 15 years, thanks in part to various small presses (print and online).

As a teacher, I view reading as integral to the writing process. For me, writing doesn't mean just sitting down to write; there's so much more going on, and the process can be a continuous one if you work at it and are lucky. In other words, you can be working on your writing even when you're not composing or revising or editing. I try to instill that perspective in the classroom.

FP: You edit *Verse* magazine, from which you also created the recently extinct *Verse Press*. What was your original impetus to get into the world of editing? Do you feel that reading so many submissions helps in your own craft?

BH: I did some editing in college (I was poetry editor of *The William and Mary Review*), and I absolutely loved it. For me, it was tremendously exciting to open the mail and see what came in. When two of the founding editors of *Verse* (who are Scottish) stepped down from the magazine in 1994, it was defunct for a while. I'd studied with the other founding editor, Henry Hart, at William and Mary and offered to help bring back the magazine.

Reading 3000+ poems a year from all over the world was immensely helpful when I was in my early and mid 20s. I was exposed to such a range of poetry, which quickly expanded my view of the art. I don't find it particularly helpful to my own writing now, but I'm always energized when something comes in that strikes me as strange, necessary, compelling.

FP: Your own work (and many poems from your recent book, *The Stripping Point*) has been heavily published in electronic journals. What attracts you, personally, to online venues?

BH: Well, there's the (relatively) instant gratification factor: poems tend to appear much more quickly in online journals than in print journals. As an editor of a (mostly) print magazine, I know very well how long and painful the production process can be for a print journal. And there are physical constraints, so sometimes work gets held for a while until it can fit into an issue.

More importantly, though, a lot of online magazines simply publish outstanding work, and they sometimes do so in innovative ways and formats. I'm thinking of *Slope's* American Sign Language video issue, *Fascicle's* installment tied to the *Imagining Language* anthology, and some others.

FP: It's pretty safe to say that you're a workaholic. You've already published five books of poetry, along with other books of criticism, and always seem to be working on multiple manuscripts. How do you balance writing several books, editing a magazine, and teaching? Do you constantly feel pressure to produce poetry?

BH: That's a funny question, because I work much less than I used to. I always used to stay up late working, and I never do that anymore—my brain won't work at that level after a certain point in the day, and if I drink coffee to stay up, I pay for it the next day when one of my kids wakes up at 6 A.M. I've certainly learned to be more efficient, and I've learned to live with not working all the time. I feel absolutely no outside pressure to produce; it's all internal. Since I started editing and writing criticism shortly after I started writing poems, those seemingly different activities have always been integral to the writing process for me. I've always been involved with others' poetry, and I spend far more time with other people's work than with my own. Inevitably, that will begin to bother me, so I'll focus exclusively on my own work for a while, which tends to be a productive period, and then the usual equilibrium will set in again. For the past few years, I've tended to work in bursts on my own writing, but like I said, I'm always involved with writing somehow. Before I had kids, that would take up most of my time (eight-12 hours/day); now I'm lucky to get an hour or two in a day.

FP: Your last two books, *Quarantine* and *The Stripping Point*, were both comprised of serial poems, and your previous books also contain a sense of unity and cohesion. What keeps you returning to serial work? Do you ever know, yourself, when a book feels cohesive (maybe that's when you know it's finished)? What is your thought process in putting the final version of the book together?

BH: All of my books have come together in different ways. My first book, *Astronaut*, is probably the most conventional in its genesis: I wrote many of the poems during graduate school, put together a thesis, wrote more poems over the next year or so, and revised the thesis until it became a book. After it was published in England in 2000, I was bothered by the book's tidiness, so I wanted to do a baggy, unwieldy book; taking Anne Carson as an example, I put together a multi-genre book, *American Incident*, which included some fiction and performance writing I'd done. While working on *American Incident*, I was writing the poems that ended up becoming *Craft*, which resembles *Astronaut* in its size but is more thematically focused. I wrote *Quarantine* in three days over Thanksgiving in 2001, and composed "Contagion" (the second half of the book) over the following week. It was a serial poem because I wrote it in such a condensed fashion. Similarly, the two pieces that make up *The Stripping Point* were written over relatively short periods of time (six weeks in 1995, a few days in 1998), and then were revised, expanded, updated in 2000 and 2005.

Last year, I finished a book called *Lessness*, which will appear in 2011. The poems span 1996 to 2006, but the book itself isn't very long. I wanted the book to have a certain atmosphere, so whenever I wrote a poem that seemed to work with the others, I put that poem in the folder; if a poem didn't seem to fit, I'd put it somewhere else (in *Craft*, say, or more recently, in another manuscript that I was working on called *Brother Witch*). I'd envisioned *Lessness* as a book back in 2002, and a year later, I started thinking about *Brother Witch*; the books are quite different, though I wrote many of the poems during the same period of time. Once I finished *Lessness*, I turned to *Brother Witch* and could finish it within a year because so many poems were already there, it was a matter of writing another 10 poems or so to round out the book.

I write mainly short poems, and sometimes when I feel like I might be repeating myself or writing the same kind of poem I wrote a month or two ago, I'll make myself shift gears. That can entail writing a sequence, a long poem, a story, a dramatic piece, or something else. The process of making that change will linger when I go back to writing short poems again, so the shorter poems shift a bit, for better or worse.

—interview conducted by Trey Moody via email on November 23, 2007