

## The Writers Slate Interview

Q1 How did you get started in writing? Any special encouragement by teachers or relatives or friends?

A My first efforts to write came early, little poems in rhyme, probably because my mother encouraged me to try. I was five. I was twenty-one and in my final semester of undergraduate school at Drury University when a professor told me that I should consider becoming a writer. Six years and eighty-seven rejections later, I sold my first story for \$5.23.

Q2 When/why did you decide to make writing your profession?

A I don't know how many writers make the decision on their own. For me it was a three step process: interest, permission, and commitment. I'd had the interest since boyhood. Writing seemed fun and I thought I was pretty good at it. But nothing came of it. I also liked too many other things to focus sharply enough on writing to take it seriously. The permission came when my Drury professor told me that I could and maybe should become a writer. I could really do it! That was important because it came from outside. Someone else, who was important in my life, was telling me it would be okay for me to write. Finally, came the commitment. Writing takes more than a decision. It takes a personal commitment to make it no matter what. Most people who say they want to write will never make it because the goal has not become important enough to stick with it.

Q3 Why did you choose poetry as a writing outlet?

A My initial, five-year-old's efforts were poetry. Rhyming and metering always made sense to me. I also spent many years as a musician, which further trained my ear for cadence and rhythm. My first book for children, *The Boy With A Drum*, was written in rhyme. I always thought of myself as a poet even though I was not taking the time to produce a book of verse. In 1988, I finally made the decision to publish a book of poetry. For three years I wrote nothing but poems until I had enough to approach a publisher. The first of my several books with Boyds Mills Press, *Somebody Catch My Homework*, sold out its first printing in less than two weeks and its second printing in a month. It became clear to me that poetry should become part of my future writing. I am now working on the sixth book of poems and have several others planned.

Q4 So much of the poetry you've written deals with your own life - - memories of childhood, etc. How do you choose a topic for a poem or a book of poems?

A Southern writers are known for their sense of time and place. Many of them spend lifetimes drawing from their southern experiences and from those of previous generations. I believe that southwest Missouri offers its own unique charm, especially in terms of place. My sense of place leads me to talk about the

things I remember doing or observing as a child and I use that material for much of my writing, whether I'm offering humorous efforts or more reflective ones. The trick, I think, is to love your place so much that you can deal with it over and over and in many ways without doing it harm or losing your respect for it.

Q5 Do you begin with a simple idea that you want to express? Or does some event trigger an idea for a poem?

A It happens both ways. Ideas really aren't hard to identify. The level of a writer's skill is determined at least as much by how he says it than what he says, especially in poetry where, as Robert Frost once observed, the fun is in the telling. A non-story teller will inform you that his cat died last week. A story teller will take you there and make you weep for the loss of a unique creature.

Q6 Many students struggle to write poetry because they don't know what's good or bad. How do you know if a poem is good?

A I just judged an all-school art contest. Walking around tables laden with student artwork from K-12, I easily picked out the more sophisticated efforts of the older, more experienced artists. The same can be said about student poetry. Improvement comes with experience and practice. The second poem may not be much better than the first, but number fifty will certainly be better than number ten. Student poets should relax and learn to enjoy working with words to express their ideas. Learn something about metaphors and how to put them to use. Experiment with alliterations and rhyming and strong visual imagery. Getting better comes naturally, over time. The young poet, like his older counterpart, will know when he is getting better.

Q7 What suggestions would you give student writers who want to improve their poetic writing?

A Basketball players can always be found jumping around under a hoop somewhere during their spare time. Cheer leaders practice incessantly, on school grounds, back yards, even in their bedrooms. Writing - - poetry or anything else - - improves the same way. Student poets need to think of themselves as poets. What do poets do? They observe. They learn to have feelings about the things and situations and people and creatures around them. They learn to jot down notes, maybe in a journal. They learn to practice expressing their thoughts in their heads while they go about other daily activities. They read some books about poetry to see what others have done or said about the subject. In short, they need to jump around under the hoop, getting better from all angles.

Q8 Can you take us through the process of writing a poem? How long does it take to write a poem? How long do you work with a poem to perfect it? Do you have several in progress at one time?

A I write poetry the same way I write a story. The idea comes first. Maybe it's about a girl who refuses to change her socks and grosses everybody out with the smell. Or a rabbit found dead beside the road. Or the first girl I ever winked at. It's usually a strong image in my mind based on something I did, observed, read about, or imagined. Next comes an effort to rough out the idea on paper, get the feel and heft of it, gain some sense of whether this thing is going to canter along with some sort of meter, and maybe rhyme, or insist on strolling there in free verse, pausing here and there to make a point. My initial drafts are almost always long and disorganized. But they are important first steps and I learn a great deal from them about what I should be doing next. From that point I can move forward with a growing sense of excitement as I see each revision produce real improvement. It isn't uncommon to go through eight to twelve drafts before I'm done. One poem can take days, even weeks, of picking it up, putting it down, changing a line, discovering a better image, etc. I can work on several books at once, but poems seem to be more selfish; they tend to want me to look at them one at a time.

Q9 How do kids respond to your poetry? What kind of feedback have you received from them?

A Letters are fun to read. Responses vary according to age. One elementary student told me I write the best poems in the whole world and added that he has not read any of my books. Another said I am the best author in the whole world but added that he likes Dr. Seuss better. At that age the world is mostly superlatives. Older students are more specific. I am always pleased when someone likes my poetry for a reason. The nature poems seem to strike a chord with many students who can identify with my feelings and observations.

Q10 Of all your books, which do you enjoy/appreciate the most? Why?

A *The Boy with a Drum* because it was my first book for young people and helped me set my compass as a writer. *The Book of Giant Stories* because it gave me confidence. *Little Turtle's Big Adventure* because it helped me learn to write about things I care about. *Somebody Catch My Homework* because it introduced me as a poet. *The Purchase of Small Secrets* because I based it on significant moments in my boyhood. *Wild Country* because in it I return to my love of nature.

Q11 Which one do your student readers seem to enjoy the most? Why?

A Young ones like the picture books, *When Cows Come Home* (starring a herd of udderly silly cows) and *Wake Up, Sun!* (a gentle little mystery based on a simple misunderstanding). Intermediate students choose *Somebody Catch My Homework* (humorous poems about school) and *A Thousand Cousins* (funny poems about family). Older readers choose *The Purchase of Small Secrets* (especially boys 8-12) and *Wild Country* (anyone who likes nature).

Q12 Any other comments?

A Poems are at their best when read aloud. I always write with that in mind and read my work many times as it develops to make certain that it reads well. Student writers can learn much about the poems they like by reading them aloud to get the full impact of the poet's effort. That may help them develop the habit of reading their own work aloud. In the end, that may be the best litmus test for determining whether or not a poem is good.