AN INTERVIEW WITH DEWITT HENRY: by Katherine Kenny

Did you always want to be a writer? How did you get to this point in your life? What or who inspired you?

I began at age 9 or 10 wanting to be a newspaperman and printer, idolizing Benj. Franklin. I was given a toy printing press with rubber type and started putting out a newspaper for my fifth grade class and charging 3 cents for it. I had to write editorials for it. Later my printing business grew. I got a hand operated platen press and some type that the high school print shop tossed out, as well as some cases from the local paper which had gone to linotype. I was praised for my themes in middle school and high school. At home, my oldest brother was an avid reader of western novels and my first serious effort, which I set laboriously in lead type, was about a show-down gun fight. My sister and mother encouraged me to read serious novels, and by 11th and 12th grade, I was reading Dostoyevski, Kafka, Emily Bronte, Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Faulkner, and trying to write my own first novel about a lonely boy coming of age. My sister was married by then, and her father-in-law was a prominent Dutch novelist, who read my stories and encouraged me. But my real ambition began at Amherst College, where I edited the undergraduate literary magazine for three years. Between high school and college, thanks to my oldest brother, who had moved to Colorado, I worked as a hay-hand on a ranch there, and the ranching family became the subject for a serious novel that attracted attention on and off campus (a portion of it appeared in the Mt. Holyoke College literary magazine). My essays for the Amherst composition courses were also sent to a New York editor by a fraternity brother of mine, and led to my getting summer work at Redbook and becoming a protégé of the managing editor of McCall's, a woman named Maggie Cousins, who wrote romance novels. Meanwhile, at Amherst I read D.H. Lawrence, above all, along with Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy. I never finished the ranching story as a novel, but as a novella it became my Amherst thesis, one of the first "creative theses" in the history of the college (and some years later, rewritten, it appeared as "Lord of Autumn" in an issue of Ploughshares, edited by Ellen Wilbur). After Amherst, I started a PhD in English at Harvard, partly because I wanted draft deferments; after my first year, I found that graduate scholarship was killing me as a fiction writer, so I applied to the Writers' Workshop at the U. of Iowa and got a teaching fellowship for a first year there, and a graduate fellowship for a second. While at Iowa I met the novelist Richard Yates, who had just published Revolutionary Road, which I had read at Amherst. He believed in a new story I was writing about workers in my family's candy factory. He left for Hollywood my second year there and my story stalled, so I came back to Harvard to finish my PhD and push my deferments past the age of 26. I would be working on the novel, with long distance encouragement from Yates, for many years to come, and it would be published after many drafts as The Marriage of Anna Maye Potts in 2001 (after Yates's death), winner of the first Peter Taylor Prize for the Novel. While I was finishing my PhD, I also gathered with other local writers in a nearby bar, the Plough and the Stars, to start the literary magazine that would become Ploughshares (I have written much of this in my essay "Arrivals"). And I was also fortunate during that time to meet and marry my life's partner, Connie.

Have you had any other professions? Which were the most fulfilling?

Other than writing, I have had two closely related professions, teaching and editing. I can't separate the three, which all involve the love of literature and what literature stands for, a way of making sense of each other and our lives. Teaching students face to face, discussing Shakespeare or novels or short stories in the classroom and in critical essays, is immediate. But editing Ploughshares is an attempt to interact creatively with contemporary writers and to connect them to readers, other editors, and opinion makers on the page, rather than face to face. I like to think of writing itself as a kind of conversation with the living, the dead, and even the unborn. In my writing, I want to talk back to the literature that inspires me, and also to that which seems to me wrong headed or slight, and to address the silences of what, in my own sense of living, has not been adequately written. I want my writing to be worthy of the writers I love and admire.

What brought you to Emerson College?

After I finished my PhD in 1971, there was a depression in the humanities. Because of Ploughshares I wanted to stay in the Boston area, and could not find work here teaching fiction writing, at least without a first book. I taught freshman composition part-time at Harvard, Simmons, and Northeastern before Professor James Randall, who had just changed the English department at Emerson to the department of Writing, Literature, and Publishing, hired me as Prose Writer in Residence in 1973-74, and began planning to offer the MFA degree. This was a school that put creative writing first, and saw literature as serving imagination and style. I was also able to teach a summer course in Shakespeare. It would be ten years, however, before Randall was able to hire me full-time, and Emerson would be my first full-time appointment. In the meantime, mostly as a volunteer, I built up Ploughshares, and Connie and I managed to live at the poverty line, supported by her day-care job. I also started getting grants, both for Ploughshares and for my writing. And I started a state-funded trade association for literary publishers called Book Affair, which held small press books fairs and promoted books by local authors to Massachusetts public libraries. I saw myself fanatically as trying to reform literary culture.

Tell me about your schooling. Was it much different from the experience Emerson students get here today?

My schooling at Amherst College was experimental in its time, stressing original thinking, rather than rote learning. Harvard, where I specialized in English Renaissance literature and did my dissertation on Shakespeare, stressed professionalism: a detailed grasp of literary history and awareness of all the critical opinions and scholarly research related to primary authors, rather like a law student's awareness of precedents or a medical student's of pathologies and cures. Originality was discouraged. I was lucky to find a like-minded mentor in Reuben Brower, however, who allowed me to write about Shakespeare's "adaptations" of his narrative sources. Both schools were dedicated to the Liberal Arts, and at the time I joined the Emerson faculty, Emerson was not: the emphasis was primarily on job skills in the communications marketplace. I was part of a gradual transformation of Emerson, led by John Zacharis and Jackie Liebergott as Presidents, to a school remarkable for its Liberal Arts core as the basis for specialized education in communications. I saw this as the continuation of the Amherst traditions I had thrived in, and which underlay the ideas of Ploughshares, my own writing, and my teaching of writing and of literature.

Ploughshares *has generated international fame and is highly regarded in the literary world. Did you know it would be so successful? How did it get started?*

Again, I write about this in my essay "Arrivals." Ploughshares began as a collective act of faith and of reform. The zeitgeist was counter-culture in 1970. This was the era of alternative journalism, with weeklies like the original Phoenix hawked by students in order to circumvent distribution channels monopolized by the dailies. Similar to the dissident journalists of my generation, young fiction writers and poets in Boston felt shut out. There was an Establishment, and there was an "us." We had come from cultural oases elsewhere and from classrooms where writing mattered more than entertainment or news. We had our older heroes and masters, who were equally ignored by, say, The Atlantic Monthly. The climate felt rigged and oppressive, with a gap that was partly generational, partly economic between those who were paid as writers and those who were not. The Establishment was utterly out of touch with the ferment and explorations of our literary generation. The original group met in the Plough and Stars, an Irish pub, where the bartender, Peter O'Malley proposed we start a broad sheet, in the tradition of literary pubs in Ireland. Writers dropped off manuscripts. And within a year, that idea morphed into doing an independent, transatlantic literary journal. O'Malley and I became co-directors, and given lively disagreements among the founding writers, we adopted the idea of a revolving editorship, where each writer would take a turn editing an issue. For my part, it was a profound idea, rooted in my Amherst background and I suppose the tradition of "practical criticism" (I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis, and company) and maybe also without my being conscious of it, in Presbyterianism (where the congregation runs the church). I would credit our example with the current practice of Houghton-Mifflin's "Best Of" series. It was a good idea; the idea of debate through the supporting evidence of sensibility. Our idea of success was aesthetic, from issue to issue, from poem and story to poem and story. We got reviewed. We got grants. We won awards. Each next issue became miraculously possible both in the richness of available work, in grant support, and our resourcefulness and determination in finding readers. Gradually the original core group gave way to more and more prominent writers outside of Boston and New England, still under my primary direction. But we had grown past reliance on volunteerism and needed institutional support. When I was hired full-time by Emerson in 1983, Emerson became a partial sponsor of the magazine, which I later moved to campus; and in 1988 the magazine was formally "acquired" by Emerson, and has since become a college publication. As I became more involved with teaching and in chairing the writing department, my protégé (and Emerson's first MFA in Creative Writing) Don Lee took over, and with the additional support of major grants from the Lila Wallace Foundation, doubled circulation and continued to build the magazine's prominence and prestige. He served brilliantly for fifteen years. I returned as Interim Director for a year as we searched for his replacement, and to our collective credit—the College's, the staff's, and all the writers who had helped to build the magazine and carry it forward—we found Ladette Randolph, a wonderful novelist and former director of the University of Nebraska Press.

She will give the magazine and its idea a third generation into the future. In 2011, we will celebrate the magazine's 40th anniversary and I will guest-edit the prose issue, involving as many of our former guest-editors as possible.

What was the inspiration for your anthologies and more specifically your latest memoir?

Every issue of Ploughshares, while I was director, was a kind of anthology. We had issues on such topics as “realism,” “men imagine women/women imagine men,” “biography, autobiography, fiction,” “moral fiction,” “confronting racism,” “Southern writing,” and “Discovery Issue.” They were spin-offs of the idea of lively discussion and disagreement, and of the larger idea that “literature” was a high-level function of debate about what mattered in our lives. I loved as a writer (and as a teacher) setting provocative agendas, and having other writers set them for me. My first book anthologies were samplers of the best from the magazine. Then James Alan McPherson and I, having spoken together about raising our daughters through the feminist decades, edited a book called Fathering Daughters: Reflections by Men. We felt that it addressed a silence on the part of fathers, often blamed for being distant, irresponsible, or repressive. We invited a number of writers with differing experiences as fathers to contribute, and to open the father and daughter conversation. My next project, Sorrow’s Company: Writers on Loss and Grief, was a response to my own grief for the loss of my parents and nephew, but more so to what I felt to be a society that resisted or denied expressions of grief; here I was able to reprint eloquent essays that voiced different stages in the grief process, from rage to transcendence. I think this is my best anthology, fully imagined, and I hope deeply moving if read more as an expressive collage than as simple gathering. My memoir is a collection of personal essays that I published over a period of ten years. It becomes an expressive collage itself, and I have my friend, John Skoyles, to thank for that. He saw a more distinct pattern than I did at first, and convinced me to leave out essays that distracted from “the story,” which is the learning curve of my life from childhood to middle age, from being parented to parenting myself, and from transitioning from the cultural indoctrinations in race, class, gender, and materialism of the post World War II years to the revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s and beyond. As a whole, the book surprised me, in that is about more than “me.” In it, I become a metaphorical “character”: an imagined self that is meaningful to strangers.

Where do you see yourself in the future?

I would like to retire within the next few years and to write full time, although I would also like to keep in touch with students through part-time teaching at Emerson. I hope to see my competed manuscript of Sweet Dreams, my childhood memoir, published (it is the middle panel of a trilogy, including my novel and Safe Suicide). I am working on another book of personal essays, Family Matters, on another novel, on a collection of literary essays, My Life in Letters, and a book on Romeo and Juliet. Health permitting, I also expect to travel, and to keep up with and grow through the adventures of my children.

What are your top 3 achievements?

Life first. In partnership with Connie, parenting my children. My books and Ploughshares, second. My teaching third, including my part in shaping the WLP Department and its curriculum, bringing Ploughshares here, and institutionalizing a vision of literary community.

What is it like to be a grandfather? How does it compare to being a father?

Now there's the subject of another book! It's the difference between playing in the game (parenting) and coaching the game (helping your children in their parenting), and basking in the outcomes (the growth in mind, heart and body of their children).

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