

Green Mountain Review Vol. XVII, No. 1: Interview with Katharine Whitcomb

You're in the process of writing your second book now. Can you talk a little about that experience? How is your approach to writing this new book different (or the same) than that to your first?

The second book is wholly governed by pre-ordained parameters and aims. Despite its formal determinism, I am writing more recklessly than I have ever. Composing within a frame of the rime royal has allowed me to take risks with language and to make sonic and metaphorical associations organically. I needed this project. "Letter to Brooks" is a book length poem, a task I envisioned to help me leap from the rut of inactivity and malaise I entered after teaching and taking on the role of "public poet." Now that I have distance, in my mind, Leaving Saturn is a youthful and vibrant collection of poems loosely pulled together after so many years of writing poetry. Even at the point of compiling the poems in Leaving Saturn into a marketable manuscript with an arc of some sorts, it was never so encoded and deliberate.

Do you find the writing of the second book is going faster than it did for Leaving Saturn?

University of Vermont has granted me the gift of time this semester; I am not teaching, however, I do have to fulfill my other obligations, advising, committee work and the like. So, I have been attempting a stanza per day, which is working out fine. I feel a great sense of accomplishment at the end of the week; in turn, meeting my formal and temporal demands makes me believe I am moving forward on the book at a satisfactory pace.

Your new book is in the form of a book-length epistolary poem addressed to the poet Gwendolyn Brooks-- and you mention in that poem that you were inspired/influenced by other poets, namely Mark Doty, W.H. Auden and Michael Harper. Can you talk a little bit about that, and what drew you to this project?

When I first read Auden's "Letter to Byron," I was struck by its accessibility, which was terrifying. Such a heady notion as raising the dead through song and addressing them, the great Orphean task, was rendered simply and elegantly before my eyes. Without much straining of voice, Auden speaks colloquially and humorously and with an abundance of wit that I find inspirational and enviable. Further, the poem does what poems should do which is to canonize to a lesser or greater degree our heroes and influences. Someone said to me recently that all poems are letters to the dead; I agreed, but the gesture is made more real somehow, more personal. Maybe, it has to do with the familiarity and regard of letter-writing during certain moments in our cultural history, but also its ability to encapsulate one's inner consciousness and attention.

I was delighted to pick up a copy of the literary journal Five Points, maybe in Powell's Bookstore Café, and read Doty's "Letter to Walt Whitman" shortly after I had discovered Auden. Well, first I thought it very serendipitous. Wystan is as much aristocratic in style and mien as his hero Byron. So, it made sense that Doty, who is emerging as one of the great, sweeping visionary voices of our time, address Whitman as comrade and avuncular sage. More than their similarities of style, I think both Auden and Doty deliciously capture the intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of their times.

I carry in my head something Michael Harper once said in an interview, that one must put one's self in a continuum of consciousness. The epistolary poem allows me to reify my believe in this beautiful maxim.

What are the particular challenges in sustaining a book-length poem? And the joys?

The joys are many. I love rhyme and the narrative or space between like-sounds, what the words have to say about each other and in tandem. With a long poem, such pleasures are continual, which is what helped to sustain my attention when I finally read Byron's "Don Juan". Further, as I mentioned earlier, the purposeful task of including the breath and richness of our life today in the poem is a lot of fun. A book-length poem cannot solely rely on its scale to triumph and win over its readers. It must reflect a high quality of attention, thought, and thinking. The poem is also sensitizing me to organization. These same joys are also the poem's challenges.

Do you revise a lot when you're working on new poems? Do you show your new poems to anyone else?

I revise continually and I have relied lately on friends to help me discern what is god-awful and what is satisfactory. This is because, like I said, I have turned off that harsh word and line critic, and am allowing myself to freely compose.

Do you have other projects these days?

I have been writing single poems here and there, but nothing that is worth publishing.

What are you reading now?

Next to my bedside Lord Byron's Don Juan, William H. Gass's Reading Rilke: Reflections on the Problems of Translation, Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks, Tracy K. Smith's The Body's Question, Adrian Matejka's The Devil's Garden.

What types of situations often suggest themselves to you as material for poetry? What are your obsessions, writing and otherwise?

I am drawn of late to situations in which the limits of our moral, ethical, and social boundaries are challenged, maybe even forfeited, for some greater awareness about who we are, what conventional desires and fears can we discard that will allow us to live more harmoniously.

Do you remember how you felt when you first saw a finished copy of your first collection, Leaving Saturn? Has your feeling toward that book changed over the years?

I arrived home after teaching a difficult class at Xavier University, that had very much to do with literacy and politics. There on the doorstep a compact box UPS-delivered from University of Georgia. Kristen and Langston were already home and must not have heard the delivery-man. So, when I brought it in and announced it, cheers and celebration all around. Then we opened the box and it was strange to finally see it, a manic kind of feeling of both dread and happiness.

I admire the way you work in form, and your new book is entirely in form. Can you talk about the stanza form you chose for your new book and what attracts you to using form?

Yes, the rime royal. The form gives so much pleasure; it is wonderfully balanced with its embedded quatrain and two pairs of couplets. The stanza's final couplet offers itself as an opportunity to make some meaningful assertion or memorable pun. It is an enormously flexible stanza if one wants to flirt with different rhythmic

constructions. But, mostly I am attracted to the possibility of creating music and song with the form, an aspect of our work which needs to return to popular taste.

Do you have any advice for those first book poets struggling with a second collection? To new poets just beginning to publish?

The reception of *Leaving Saturn* was debilitating; for awhile, I could not write without the self-conscious thought of letting down this new readership of my work in some sort of fashion. The feeling was palpable. So, I believe I am really lucky to have allowed myself the time to not write and to live – all the while jotting notes to myself or keeping a menu of ideas. The project of writing a letter has put me back to square one, in that, I am learning new dimensions about writing, about myself, revealing a passion I have for the civil and rewarding experiencing of composing in verse, and more, a greater appreciation for the multiple valences of a poem. So, all that to say, I do not believe per se in “projects,” however, I think this might be an important antidote for the pressures of a second book. Further, no one expects the second book to knock the socks off its readers, anyway. In short, go for it. Write recklessly.