

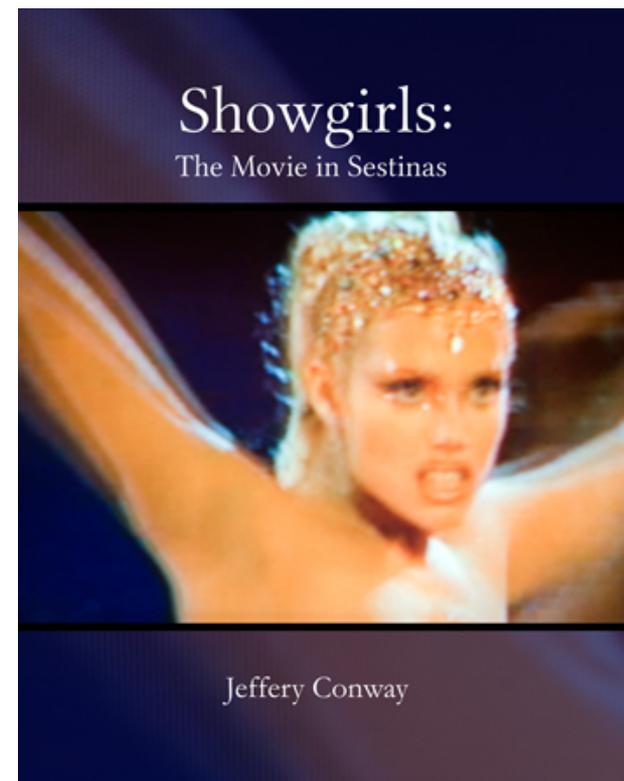
BlazeVOX Interview with Jeffery Conway

Tell me about your book.

Showgirls: The Movie in Sestinas is a book of poetry for people who love trash—that is to say, for people who love trashy movies. It's also a book for people who love trashy poets (e.g., *me*). To appropriate reasoning from a character in *Showgirls*: Maybe you like *Showgirls* [Paul Verhoeven's 1995 Camp masterpiece], or maybe you like me [a poet who, let's be honest, is kind of a Nomi Malone himself]—what difference does it make? Have a read—you can learn about trashy/campy films, the poetry world (and *this* poet's climb to the middle); you can learn about celebrities, tangential trivia, and you can have the experience of reading an entire book that encases its miracle within the straightjacket of poetic forms—the sestina—while (hopefully) not even realizing it! The book is “hypnosis through sestina.” Relax, breathe. Open to the first poem in the book and begin the ride of a lifetime with the stripper/wannabe Vegas dancer of your dreams.

What influenced this book?

Well, the 1995 film *Showgirls*, obviously. After you've watched a film about a hundred times over the course of eight or nine years, there comes a point when you need to sit yourself down and ask: *so, what the hell?* Also, my love of the sestina form, which I've been experimenting with for twenty-five years; a form I embraced fervently, with a vengeance, about twenty years ago when it was revealed to me that some poet referred to me as “that sestina queen.” In 1991, when I was studying at Brooklyn College, Allen Ginsberg (my esteemed professor), said he thought I was “a natch with the form,” and he suggested that I try writing a whole book of sestinas. It was Ginsberg's voice I heard when I started my *Showgirls: The Movie in Sestinas* project in March of 2007—more than fifteen years after his suggestion.



Where does this book fit into your career as a writer?

As Faye Dunaway playing Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest* (donned in huge puffball fur hat and shoulder-padded business suit and skirt, poised at one end of an enormous boardroom conference table flanked by PepsiCo stuffed shirts): “This ain’t my first time at the rodeo!” I had written about a movie (the 1950 film *All About Eve*) once before—in *Phoebe 2002: An Essay in Verse* (2003)—along with two collaborators, Lynn Crosbie and David Trinidad. *Showgirls: The Movie in Sestinas* was my first attempt at inhabiting a movie alone. My last book, *The Album That Changed my Life* (2006), was filled with many personal, autobiographical poems. Yet even in that book I included a long prose poem detailing my encounters with celebrities during my “incarceration” as a bartender in Los Angeles and as cater waiter to the stars in New York City, so clearly I still had some karma to burn off with this *Showgirls* book. I am also writing another collaborative mock epic (with Gillian McCain and David Trinidad) about the 1967 film *Valley of the Dolls*. We’ve been working on it for nine years so far, but we’re more than halfway through! It’s a joy because I’m doing it with two great friends who also happen to adore bad movies. And we choose to take our time and savor each and every frame of that gloriously trashy film.

If you had to convince a friend or colleague to read this book, what might you tell them?

Appeal to his senses—mimic Crystal Connors (Gina Gershon) toying with Nomi Malone (Elizabeth Berkley) over a bottle of champagne at Spago: “I like great tits, how about you?” Too non sequitury? Inappropriate? Hey, I’ve piqued his interest. For my female friends, I might explain that this book of poems takes on one of the most atrociously misogynist films of all time and that she owes it to herself and her entire sex to read it. Or, I might just be honest: this obsessive queen I call “me” relishes, analyzes, and celebrates one of the worst films ever made frame by frame in the obsessive sestina form. I write one sestina for each DVD chapter of *Showgirls*. I borrow the titles of the DVD chapters for the titles of my poems: “Switchblade Nomi,” “It’s the Show, Girl!,” “Cristal Magic,” “Lap Dancer’s Delight,” and so on. My sestinas function as DVD commentary—descriptive, informative, insightful, self-revealing, and (I have to admit) pretty funny. There are rhyming sestinas, double sestinas and triple sestinas. There’s a variation of the form (that I think I invented) where I replace each of the six end-words with an end-category—body parts, for instance, or characters’ names, which change from stanza to stanza: breasts, vagina, hand, etc.; Nomi, Cristal, Zack, etc. There are floating sestinas, a parody of rap lyrics, a jab at ivory tower gay poets, and even a sendup of Faye Dunaway’s infamous voicemail diatribe as Mab Lib. Open the book anywhere and you’ll find red lace panties, the clink of champagne flutes, backroom lap dances, bumps of coke, and “lots of bare breasts.”

Tell me about the last literary reading you attended.

Well, it was a literary reading featuring Matthew Burgess and yours truly at Columbia College Chicago. Matthew was great; he’s a real poet, and a generous man. He read from his wonderful book *Slippers For Elsewhere*. I read poems from *Showgirls: The Movie in Sestinas*, which was a good experience in and of itself.

However, the added bonus was that I got to show clips of the film on this huge screen behind me. There was like a twenty-foot Nomi right behind me! I mean . . . we have the best higher educational system in the world. What could be more instructive for a group of undergrads and MFA students than a survey of scenes from the greatest movie ever made? God, I would have killed to attend a reading like that when I was in school. Wait, does that sound egotistical? So be it—it's the truth!

When did you realize you were a writer?

In my very early twenties, I moved into an apartment on Sunset Boulevard at La Cienega in Los Angeles with two friends. It was a cool, two-story, mid-century building with a swimming pool in the center courtyard. The lore of the place was that Marilyn Monroe had once stayed there briefly . . . but I'm not sure if that's true. My bedroom was at the back of the building, facing a very steep hillside, or cliff, really, where rocks and small boulders would tumble down at random moments. There was a huge Seagram's 7 billboard planted in the lot next door that lit up the corner windows of my room. There weren't any blinds or drapes included in the deal, so I'd wear sunglasses to bed. Shortly after I moved in all of my stuff (a foam futon, a framed Calvin Klein poster, some bedraggled clothes, a candle, my New Wave records), I found a paperback copy of *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann on the shelf inside the closet. I had never heard of the book before; in fact, I had little interest in books at that point in my life, I had always assumed that the coolest things were never in books. But for some reason, I started to read *Death in Venice* little by little, soaking up every drop of its gloomy atmosphere. Eventually I got to a page where a particular phrase had been underlined with what looked like a blue pencil: "some strange, rash, bewildered dream." I skimmed the rest of the book. It was the only thing underlined in the entire text. I became fascinated, read it again and again, pondered its meaning, its message. I wondered about the hand that had underlined it. Who was this being so moved by this cryptic thought? What compels a person to make note of a particular string of words? I had never been aware before that moment of the *relationship* that the writer and reader engage in when one agrees to write and another agrees to read. *Some strange, rash, bewildered dream.* I wrote it large on my bedroom wall, painted the phrase on a T-shirt, copied it over and over again on countless sheets of paper. It was my first obsession with "words." Not long after, I got a job at a Beverly Hills bookstore where expensive coffee table books were the order of the day. But inside that Hunters Books on Beverly Drive I discovered a well-stocked, decidedly unbrowsed Poetry section. I found *Love Is A Dog From Hell* by Charles Bukowski and *Live or Die* by Anne Sexton. Need I say more? Those two books changed my life, showed me *me* inside other writers' lives. And just like that: voila—another writer is born.

Tell us about your process: Pen and Paper, computer, notebooks ... how do you write?

I write in different ways at different times: sometimes I write/compose right on my MacBook; sometimes I write in whatever journal is current (with blank pages available), and I write a whole poem there (or I may later transfer what I started in the journal into my computer and continue or finish the piece with the keys). Occasionally I will write the first draft of a poem on a collection of Post-it Notes and eventually assemble

them in what appears to be the right order, and then type the poem on my computer.

How do you handle a bad review of your work?

With grace (I hope!), or at least with acceptance. One time when a reviewer wrote something negative (in retrospect, and to be completely honest, the whole review wasn't bad, just a few sentences of it were), I pulled out one of my favorite books, *Powers of Ten: A Flipbook* by Charles and Ray Eames. A few minutes with that book helped bring my reaction back to right size. As you flip and watch, the journey begins one billion light years away, with every two pages of the book representing a view ten times larger than the view two pages earlier. You descend the dimensions of the universe, through our solar system, down to a park on earth, then into the human body, its cells, DNA and finally a single proton. *Powers of Ten* shows us not only the relative size of things in the known universe, but also our place in it. This book helps bring proper perspective to all things, especially one's own ego—and all with just a few easy flips!.

Which writer would you most like to have a drink with, and why?

Gosh there are so many dead writers I'd like to hang out with for a bit, though I'd have to wait till I'm in Spirit, which (I've been assured by two psychic clairvoyants) won't be for a long, long time. Here's my list (in no particular order): Charles Bukowski (though I'd like him semi-sober for our sit down), Anne Sexton, Frank O'Hara, Sylvia Plath, Raymond Carver, Jane Austen (I know, what can I say?), David Foster Wallace, Emily Dickinson (though I bet that would be some fraught teatime), Walt Whitman, and Jacqueline Susann. But if I had to pick one, a living one, I'd choose Toni Morrison, because I think chatting with the person who wrote *Beloved* would be, like, fantastic.

What's the biggest mistake you've made as a writer?

Mistake? I don't believe that's possible in terms of my writing. That may sound grandiose or flippant, but it's really how I feel today. Everything I've ever written, even last week's shopping list, seems like it was *exactly* what I was supposed to write when I wrote it. When I first started yoga a few years ago, the teachers would say "Namaste" at the end of each class. I thought they were saying "no mistake," which I thought beautiful and profound. I had never heard "Namaste" before starting yoga, but I was totally on board with the concept of "no mistakes." There are, really, no mistakes. I'm kind of in love with reality at the moment. So, "no mistake" for me as a writer. I've always felt that the act of writing is intimately connected to my spiritual growth. Benjamin Saltman, a professor I had in college for a senior poetry seminar, wrote on my first manuscript of poems: "I see a vibrant Spirit longing for union." Those words have always been my compass, I guess, as I navigate and write my way through life on Earth. I'm here to grow and learn, and writing, however it comes, aids me in that quest.

What's the worst advice you hear authors give writers?

“Write what you know”? Gosh, I used to think that was so astute and sound. But at this point in my life, I wonder. . . . Maybe authors should tell writers to “write what you don’t know.” If anything, it might shake things up a bit until we get mostly bored again.

What scares you the most?

For years I would answer “raisins” to that question. I’ve always thought they are the queerest little things. But today, I say “unconsciousness.” That scares me. I want all people, myself included, to be conscious beings, to be present, to be awake to our true natures.

Where do you buy your books?

My two favorite bookstores in New York are St. Mark’s Bookshop and Strand Bookstore. Online I like Small Press Distribution.

Who are you reading now?

Right now I’m finishing *The Complete Dark Shadows (of My Childhood)* by Tony Trigilio, which is so great. The next book up is *Storyline: Reflections of a Hollywood Screenwriter*, a 1973 autobiography of Lenore Coffee. She wrote the screenplay of *Beyond the Forest*, one of my all-time favorite *bad* movies from 1949, starring Bette Davis as the Vampira-bewigged Rosa Moline, who is just a hilariously awful person.

What is your favorite TV show at the moment?

The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills. And practically any show on TLC. There, I’ve said it.

Bonus Round:

What do you want the world to know about you? Make it juicy
(See answer to previous question—talk about confessional!)