

BlazeVOX Interview with John Tranter on his forthcoming book *Heart Starter*

Tell me about your book.

My book is titled *Heart Starter*. That's a phrase I owe to a friend — I asked him in 1974 why he always drank a bottle of whiskey at night, and why he always left an inch of spirits in the bottom of the bottle when he went to bed. Why not finish the thing? He was a schoolteacher. He replied 'Mate, if you had to get up in the morning and go to my school and teach those kids all day, you'd need a heart starter too.'

What influenced this book?

Well, it contains a hundred and one poems, and it's made up of three sections: some poems related to *The Best of the Best American Poetry 2013* (Series Editor, David Lehman, Guest Editor, Robert Pinsky), some poems related to *The Open Door: One Hundred Poems, One Hundred Years of 'Poetry' Magazine* (Don Share and Christian Wiman, Eds., 2012), and thirty or so poems, mainly rhymed sonnets, written by me in recent years.

In the first two sections, I chose to write *Terminals*; that is, I started with drafts which borrowed the end-words of each line of some poems in each of the two books concerned. So I guess you could say that for the first two thirds of the book, the poems were influenced by the models they drew on. For example, there's a poem titled 'Three Lemons' which began as a draft using the end-words of 'Three Oranges' by Charles Bukowski. There's a lot of Bukowski in the tone of that poem. And there's one titled 'A Pompeiian Aristocrat Considers the Future' which began as a draft using the end-words of 'Self-portrait as Four Styles of Pompeian Wall Painting' by Henri Cole. I met Henri in New York in 1985, and again in Italy in 2009, and I feel there's a little bit of Henri in that poem. Just a bit. And that applies generally. Mostly the poems are mine, of course.

And the rhymed sonnets often take off from Rimbaud's famous sonnet 'Voyelles', which deals with the supposed colours of the vowels, though with a more variegated palette in my case. I mean, there are millions of colours, aren't there? Taupe, for example, and bisque, and cadet blue... And I often borrow his rhyme scheme. I should note that Rimbaud chose to sequence the vowels AEIUO, not AEIOU as is usually the case in French and in English, perhaps to coincide with the Biblical quote 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.'

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

It's my twenty-fourth book of poems, and I'm getting on now, so I guess it's an old man's book, full of wisdom, the fruit of reflections on a life well lived and masses of bullshit. No, I'm kidding. It borrows and argues with a lot of other writings and art works, and I seem to have been doing that all my life, so in a way it's more of the same. And it uses rhyme and strict metre, which is something unusual in the poetry scene. I mean it is unusual now; once it was common, a hundred or so years ago, and especially common in popular music lyrics. That's unusual for me. So far I have mostly written in a kind of free verse, though I have always been interested in poetic form.

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

I would say 'You'd be crazy not to read this wonderful book! It will change your life! Okay, if you read this book, I'll give you a hundred dollars!'

Tell me about the last literary reading you attended.

Gee, there have been so many, from Stockholm to Saint Mark's Place... the last one was at Sappho bookstore in Glebe here in Sydney, packed with crowds of keen young people reading and listening. It was like the old days: wonderful. Among many other good poets, I read a general selection of my poems and people seemed to like them. When I choose poems to read out, I have learned (from my experience as a radio producer) to choose ones that people will 'get' at one hearing, because that's

the only chance they have to hear the poem. Some of my poems are quite complex and invite you to look back through the printed version and think a bit about all the complexities and references in the writing: they don't work at all at a reading, as people just don't get them. I have found that audiences are sometimes shy; they don't always let you know how they feel. They usually just sit there. They might be amazed and thrilled, or they might be bored to death and waiting for you to get off. You can't tell.

When did you realize you we're a writer?

I knew I had a talent for writing during my adolescence. When I was about nineteen my clever grandmother asked me was I going to be a poet like that Dylan Thomas fellow. 'His biographer Constance Fitzgibbon wrote that he — Thomas — could say no neither to a drink nor to a woman! I hope you're not going to be like that!' she added, with a wicked smile. And thoughtful teachers and fellow-students at my various schools encouraged me. But I liked drawing, too, and other things, and for a while there I thought I might be a cartoonist, or an artist, or a painter, or a musician. I didn't really decide against all those other talents until I was in my late twenties, when I realised that writing was the only thing I did really well.

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

Well, I do have an obsession with good fountain pens and good ink and paper. So I often sketch out a poem, though a few drafts, with pen and paper. Though I have found that a really expensive fountain pen only makes me more aware of my horrible handwriting, and money can't improve that. And I sometimes begin on a computer keyboard, using a program like Scrivener, say — the program I'm using now — that allows you to arrange and rearrange your thoughts quickly and easily. And sometimes I set up a computer program that does part of my first draft for me — Brekdown, for example. That can be fun. But in the end, what you use to write with is irrelevant. A pencil and paper are all you need to be a poet, really. Dickens wrote over five million words using a steel-nib dip pen and a bottle of ink.

How do you handle a bad review of your work?

That depends on the review. If it's stupid, I laugh and laugh. I wish I could say I did as Liberace said he did with bad reviews: he claimed he cried all the way to the bank. Alas, there's no money in poetry, so I only go to the bank to withdraw my paltry savings. But if the review is clever and considered and thoughtful and devastating, I feel terrible, and like most writers I remember the insults for years. Isn't that awful? Imagine being that reviewer and knowing that something you wrote made someone feel terrible for years. You'd shoot yourself.

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

Frank O'Hara, I guess. I never met him, but I hear he was a wonderful gossip, and gossip is a natural accompaniment to a drink. And Elizabeth Bishop, because I believe she was funny and clever and a bit shy. And Barbara Guest, whom I met once, because she could be so beautifully ascerbic. And John Ashbery... I've had a few drinks with John, and he's great fun and extremely intelligent.

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

Oh, becoming a poet. I should have been a banker, like T.S.Eliot, or an insurance man, like Wallace Stevens.

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

'Write about what you know. Write dangerously. Join my creative writing class.' God, there's a lot of bullshit around. Is it getting worse, or am I imagining it?

What scares you the most?

Have you read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? Do you think I'm going to tell you? What do you think I am, crazy? But for the sake of this interview, I might say that I am afraid of public speaking, as most people are. I used to have a terrible stammer, and I am always afraid it might come back when I least expect it, and humiliate me. And here I am, a poet, with hundreds of public readings under my belt! I must be crazy!

Where do you buy your books?

I don't buy books so much now. Yes, that's unfair, I know. But I have thousands of second hand books already, that cost heaps to buy new, once upon a time, and guess what? They're worthless! I tried to sell some the other day, and the guy just laughed at me. I like a good bookstore, but most bookstores these days only keep a single copy, or even no copies, of the books you want. 'Oh, we can order one in for you,' they say. Sure! I feel sorry for bookstores, in this age of the Internet, but they think very little of poetry. There's nothing they love more than a best-seller, however awful it is. And publishers are little better, generally: they always like a money-making 'trend'. Except for devoted publishers like BlazeVox for example. I hope you don't go broke soon.

Who are you reading now?

Old things... I am re-reading some old John Ashbery, and re-reading a newish Ashbery: his version of Rimbaud's 'Les Illuminations'. Ashbery lived in France for a decade, and has fluent French, and only a fool would criticise his new versions of Rimbaud; they are intense and colourful, and occasionally unusual. And there's a wonderful old book by John Malcolm Brinnin, titled *Dylan Thomas in America*. It was first published in 1955; this reissue by British publisher Prion has a new introduction by Drew Milne, a lecturer at the University of Cambridge. The fussy and uptight Brinnin shepherded the shambolic and ferociously alcoholic Thomas back and forth across America during the poet's last three years, and the story he tells is a fascinating one: better than an episode of *The Odd Couple*.

What is your favorite TV show at the moment?

I watch less and less television. I used to watch *Callan*, once. Though television has had the accidental effect of reviving lots of wonderful old movies: *Doctor Strangelove*, *The Third Man*, *the Maltese Falcon*, *Vertigo*... currently I enjoy the *Antiques Road Show* from Bristol, in the UK (Archie Leach, a.k.a. Cary Grant, was from Bristol) and the serial *Foyle's War*, about Britain in the 1940s.

What do you want the world to know about you? Make it juicy

I don't think I want the world to know anything particularly juicy about me. I could say that I was raised in a harem by a pair of lesbians and had seventeen lovers by the time I was twelve years old and I don't remember much about the experience because I was generally stoned on opium most days, but none of that would be true. The reality involves an isolated farm in the Australian bush, an agricultural high school, a few aborted courses at the University of Sydney and a year on the hippie trail through Europe and Asia and lots of hashish, but that may not be entirely true either. As for what the world wants to know, I really don't care: as long as they all buy my book I'm happy. I could say there's more mystery in a well-turned rhyme (Degas and gay bar, for example, or rescue and fescue, both of which make an appearance in my book) than in a drug-crazed night in a transvestite brothel, but that may not be quite true either.

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