

Interview with Daniel Donaghy, author of *Streetfighting*

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Interviewed by Heather Clark

Q. A central theme of these poems relates to your adolescence. How did that time of your life come to inspire you so powerfully?

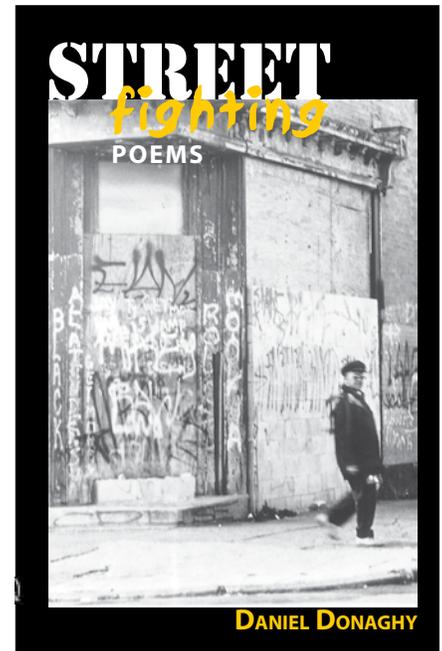
A. Adolescence was a time of so many first and last things. Leaving one way of looking at things and moving toward a more complicated way of knowing. It was a time when I was wild and reckless and ignorant to so many things. I try to capture in the poems the boundless energy, as I recall it, from that time in my life. In addition, I try to capture the mystery surrounding that time, as well as what I thought and felt about the world back then. There were some rocky times. My father moved out when I was 12, so I was with my mom and sister alone in inner-city Philadelphia. I felt this pressure to assume the role of the man of the house, to somehow be the provider and protector, even though I didn't know how to do that. I remember lying awake in my room so many nights, listening to music, wondering what was going to happen to me. I remember watching the El clack past my window and wondering where I belonged, if I was ever going to get out of that place. I was so scared and lonely sometimes.

When I didn't find answers in my family or in my neighborhood or my teachers, I looked inside. When I looked inside, I found art—especially music and literature. The first words that ever truly shook my world were lyrics to rock songs, and most of those songs were by Bruce Springsteen. When he sang, in “Backstreets,” “Once soft infested summer/Me and Terry became friends/Trying in vain to breathe/ The fire we were born in” and, in “Thunder Road,” “This is a town full of losers/And I'm pulling out of here to win,” I said, “Hey, that's me.” The world suddenly got bigger. That's the only way I can say it. His was the first of many voices that made me think of the place I grew up in as only one of many places, as a place I was going to live in only for a little while. Springsteen's music, more than anything else at that time, gave me permission to have big dreams. His music led me to start thinking that some day I was going to be somebody. Springsteen has had that impact on a lot of people. I tried to pay homage to the influence of both rock music and poetry on my life in the beginning of the book, where I quote Springsteen and T.S. Eliot. You used an interesting word by saying powerfully. I asked a lot of questions of myself and these questions ultimately led me to become a writer.

Q. The title of the book is Streetfighting. What is the title's significance to you?

A. The title can be taken one of two ways: either as a literal term, as something I did, because I did get into street fights, often with men much older than I; and also as a metaphor for trying to find a way out of the city.

I grew up in the Kensington section of Philadelphia, a place of row houses and old mills, a place without a large margin of error. People didn't have much there, but they had pride, and sometimes that pride led to fights and shouting and threats and so on. Street fights were pretty common. Several times, I got in street fights because I thought I had to. I thought it was my responsibility to go out and stick up for my family, just like in “Streetfighting” where I said, “I raced out the front door / wanting someone to stop me, / mix of who I was and thought I had to be / swirling in my head



since he [my father] left us / in inner-city Philadelphia.” No one told me not to do it. I would have stopped if someone had told me, “Stop. This is crazy. You’re just a boy.”

Before they moved out of the city, I often went back to Kensington to visit my mother and sister. When I drove those old streets, it was very emotional for me. I am able to see now that we lived in a bad part of a wonderful city. There is plenty that is beautiful in Philadelphia. Without question, it’s my favorite city, even with all that happened there while I was growing up. I am reminded of Wordsworth’s words about poetry being the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility. It took a while for the tranquility and the larger perspective to come. It also took a while for me to come to terms with the mysteries surrounding what happened in that place. You can never truly get to the bottom of the past, but if you’re lucky you can get close enough so you don’t have to spend so much time looking through it like an old junk drawer. When you get to that point, you can appreciate the beauty of the present more fully and with your new perspective look again at the past in a new, fuller light.

Q. Your poems are not arranged in their chronological order; for example, “Visitation B.V.M. Holiday Dance, 1982” precedes “Digging for Summer: 1986,” which is before “Laundry Night, 1983.” Why the adjustment in time progression throughout the book?

A. When putting the book together, I was more interested in aligning the poems thematically than chronologically. I think a chronological order would have been too predictable; such an order would be more fitting for a memoir—which is a project I hope to get to before too long. Plus, so many of the poems mix memory and imagination—or rely entirely on imagination—that a chronological order wouldn’t have made much sense. I did, however, have goals in mind for the first poem and the last poem. I wanted the first poem, “The One Time I Paid Attention At Friday Morning Mass,” to be on the lighter side. I wanted to begin the book by calling up that boundless energy that I alluded to earlier, that coming-of-age exuberance and sexual tension that brought about so much fun and got us in trouble in so many ways. I hope that poem makes you laugh or smile or at least suggests that the person who wrote it is capable of seeing the light as well as the dark. The book essentially moves from childhood into adulthood, back and forth from light and dark. I hope it is never too dark or too light and that the poems complement each other in a way that speaks to the complexities and range of our real lives. I hope that some of the poems make you smile and that some punch you in the stomach.

Along the way, I introduce characters like Buddy Fisher, One-Eyed Timmy, Jimmy, and George, all of whom are based on real people I knew. George, for instance, is based on a guy who was awful at his life—an irresponsible father and husband, an unreliable employee, a chronic drug user—but was the most beautiful basketball player I ever played against. He was in absolute control on a basketball court, raining three pointers, making smart passes, calming everyone down and running the show when games got close. Amazing. For him, basketball was a creative outlet. It provided him with what Robert Frost called “a momentary stay against confusion” that I have since found in poetry. At least he had basketball. It scares me to think that when some people look inside themselves, they don’t find anything.

Q. You can write dispassionately about the poverty you lived in growing up. How do you write about it without sentimentalizing that time in your life?

A. I see my writing about Philadelphia as similar to the writing of other people whom we generally associate with particular regions or time periods. We call Bruce Weigl and Tim O’Brien writers of the Vietnam War. We call Dostoyevski a Russian writer, Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty Southern writers, Langston Hughes a Harlem Renaissance writer. If the work of these writers only has relevance within the context of geography or history, then it would not have lasting significance. Each writer goes beyond region and time and race and addresses fundamental issues pushing against the heart of each of us.

I hope my work pushes up against some of the same questions. In my childhood, I was given the landscape of Philadelphia. In a broader sense, though, I have been given the same range of human frailties and strengths to work with that any other artist has been given. I will always return to examine that landscape in my mind. In that sense, I’ll always be a Philadelphia writer. While my writing may be set in Philadelphia or in some other specific place, I hope the hearts alive in the writing are recognizable to readers with all kinds of backgrounds. I’m not saying I’m in the same

league as the people I just mentioned. I'm saying only that I recognize their impulses.

Q. Your style shifts a little for the poem "Cinderella at Middle Age." What accounts for this change from the cruel realities of life to the parallel of fairy tales and imagination?

A. I wrote that poem in response to a grad course at the University of Rochester taught by Russell Peck called Myth and Fairy Tale. In it, we discussed *The Feminine Mystique*, which questions the myth of the happy, subservient housewife who pops out children and cleans the house all day. "Cinderella at Middle Age" is the perfect of example of past meeting present—what I was reading at the time being filtered by my past experiences. I asked myself "What if Cinderella lived in Kensington?" and the poem unfolded from there.

Q. Often you use commas as the only punctuation. Is this to keep lines continual, or to form more of a list for your audience? Is there another purpose?

A. Form and punctuation usually emerge in revision. Some poems demand more energy, with a lot of enjambed lines and long sentences. Others are the opposite. You can't impose form on a poem—at least I can't. The subject matter and the energy and viewpoint I bring to the poem determine the poem's shape and focus and rhythm.

If you take your index finger and place it at the beginning of the line and read across the line, then get it back quickly to the beginning of the next line, the motion is a lot like a whirlwind's. The poet Len Roberts taught me that. He got it, I think, from Walt Whitman and others. I try to create momentum to pull the reader down the page with a kind of relentless energy. Such a move creates intensity. It can help build suspense in a serious poem or build up a funny moment until it's very funny. It's like there is no time to stop. The audience gets pulled deeper and deeper and, at the end, gets thrown to a place they never saw coming but that provides them with that "stay against confusion" that Frost alludes to. Aristotle says endings should be surprising, yet inevitable. I hope that is the feeling people have when they come to the end of one of my poems.

Q. With so much in the book focusing on your adolescence, have you planned any of your more recent works to share more about your life now, including your wife and daughter?

A. These are not the only kind of poems I write. I think it would be a mistake for someone to say "I'm going to write a book of poems about growing up" and then write only poems about those earlier experiences. It would stifle your creativity, I think, and tempt you to write in a nostalgic, sentimental way. I wanted my first book to be about getting out of Philadelphia. At the same time, I wanted it to offer a breadth of experiences and perspectives, those tranquil recollections that Wordsworth alludes to.

The range between the oldest and newest poem in the book is twelve years. That's a long time. As I see it, the poems in *Streetfighting* make up the emotional and intellectual map that has led me to where I am in my life. The book is ultimately about a coming to terms. It has a happy ending, I think. It's about life being more than just hard. I see the poems speaking to each other in funky ways across the years of their composition.

The working title for my next book is "Start With the Trouble," which is a motto about beginning one's work by completing the hardest part first. Once you finish the hard part, you're home free. I don't know if I'm home free, but I feel like I've gotten through what a lot of people, for a lot of reasons, don't get through. I feel very lucky. The next manuscript is chock full of poems about my daughter, Abigail, and my wife, Karen, and my adult life. It's got its share of Philly poems, too.

Q. Is it important how you begin and end your book of poems? If so, why did you start with "The One Time I Paid Attention at Friday Morning Mass," and saved "Fresh Start: Staining the Pool Deck" for last?

A. I think books of poems should begin with some kind of welcoming tone and end with some kind of logical closure. The construction of a book of poems is very important, although I don't think anyone can explain exactly how to do it. So much depends on the state of mind you're in when you're assembling the manuscript. A fair way to

explain the perfect order of a poetry manuscript may be to call up Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of obscenity: "I know it when I see it."

It is important to think about beginnings and endings. When I am teaching creative writing classes, I ask students to put together a portfolio of their work at the end of the term. Along the way, I ask them to write a poem of invitation or introduction—whatever that means to them. Some students have written about themselves or their hometowns, others their friends or family, still others the work in their portfolio. I also ask them to write a good-bye poem. These are some of the finest poems my students have written, because they usually come late in the term, after we've discussed the power or imagery, suggestion, mystery, and things like that. Those will be the first and last pieces in the portfolio. The students then need to find surprising, interesting, and logical ways to love from one piece to the next until they get to the good-bye poem.

I've already talked about "The One Time I Paid Attention at Friday Morning Mass," which I hope provides a tone of the introduction to the book. I had trouble finding the final poem for the book. For a while, it was going to be "Halfies in Philadelphia and the Ritual of Desire," which ends on a high note and suggests a world beyond the book. I had a breakthrough, though, when I wrote "Fresh Start: Staining the Pool Deck." That was a real breakout poem for me. Something happened about halfway through when I wanted the poem to turn and address certain things but it simply resisted. It demanded to go in a new, strange direction. Soon enough, Richard Wright was in the poem. Bob Dylan. Raskolnikov. These people had broken through one kind of knowing and charged head-first into a more important and sustaining kind. They were lucky, yet none escaped unscathed. I saw the arc of my story following in that general path. Not to the same magnitude, perhaps, but in the same direction. Once I finished that poem, I knew it had to be the last poem in the book. Whatever poems come next move forward from the affirmations put forth in the book's final poem.



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