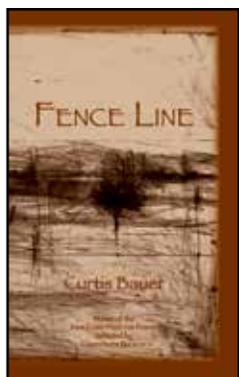


an interview with
Curtis Bauer



author of
Fence Line

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Photo by Idoia Elola

interviewed by Elizabeth Smith

Q: You grew up with a farming family. What led you into teaching and writing, and was it a difficult transition to make?

A: I actually grew up with farmers and artists; my father and stepmother are painters and my stepfather and grandfather were farmers.

I went into teaching for several reasons: I didn't know what else to do. I knew I didn't want to farm; I'd seen my stepfather and his friends go into debt, take on second jobs, third jobs and still not have enough money to pay the bills, and farming at that time, like today, was a "go big or get out" kind of endeavor. And to tell you the truth, I didn't really like the farm. I can look back on that life now and say how wonderful it was to be out in the country, learn how to take care of animals and raise crops, but it was a hell of a lot of hard work. I hated weekends and summer vacations; it meant more work, early mornings, long days and rough hands while my friends were out at the lake with girls or driving around getting into trouble. Nonetheless, I wouldn't trade in the work ethic I acquired for anything, or the respect I now hold for a good day's work and the people who do it.

So instead of taking over my grandfather's farm right after high school I went to college. After four years I was a disgruntled political science major, I was annoyed with the Republican regime, and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was offered a teaching position in Mexico and thought living abroad and traveling for a while would at least give me some time and money.

I don't know what led me to writing. I took a required writing class in high school in which the teacher, Mr. Headly, would write sample constructions on the board and we had to model them. So I'd write stories in order to make the time pass a little faster.

I traveled a fair amount when I was in high school—I went to Germany and what was then the Soviet Union—and I studied in London when I was in college and traveled around Europe; each trip I'd keep a journal as well as write letters to friends and family. I think it was in these journals and letters that I started to really think about what I was seeing, and I attempted to describe it in a way that my letters would reflect exactly what I saw. Living and working in Mexico and Spain only added to the practice of these skills, and after three years in Spain, during which I began writing more seriously, I thought I could benefit from the structure of a writing program, or at least a community of writers I thought I might find there.

Q: What impact do you think your experiences working on farms have had on you, both as a writer and in general?

A: From an early age I realized that I'd have to work for anything I wanted, and that I'd have to work hard; I learned how to work and survive in not-so-great conditions. I learned that I can do just about anything if I need to: I know how to weld, how to do construction, fix pipes, change the oil on large machines, how to drive a grain truck, sight a hog or steer that's ready for market. How do these things help me function in the world today? About as well as an MFA in poetry, but that life gave me experiences I can draw from not just for a poem, but in understanding the people around me.

I approach my work, whether it's writing a poem, doing a translation, reading Keats, teaching the sonnet, or painting my house, with respect for the work at hand. I learned this from the farmer and artist who played such an important role in my life—my grandfather and father. Both men had, and in the case of my father and the memory of my grandfather, still have a tremendous work ethic which included a respect for the material they chose to work with, how the end product would appear and the process of going about the work.

My grandfather taught me, among many other things, respect: In the poem "A Fence Line Running Through It" I write 'Dig, he would say, and all morning,/ afternoon, until it rained,/ until dark, until I couldn't/ lift the spade and grub/ and he said enough,/ I dug' For me this line encapsulates my relationship with my grandfather. Of course I did what he told me to do because he was my elder, but also I was the apprentice and that digging was what was going to get me

The fence is an important boundary and division, but it's also a place that is shared.
—Curtis Bauer

through life. I'd have to know how to sweat if I wanted to get anywhere; I'd also have to know how to use my "noggin," as he used to say. And at the end of the day if that fence wasn't strong enough to withstand the force of a rowdy cow running head-long into it, not to mention straight, what was the use of putting it in?

My father's the same. He too grew up on a farm in Iowa and is one of the hardest-working men I know. I was always dismayed when I'd hear someone talk about a painter who would sleep late, who had a messy studio, or who would paint when the muse struck. He's an early riser, his studio is spotless and he's painting or drawing, or at least consumed by the thought of doing so, every day whether that painting or drawing is on the easel or in his head. If you're going to build a life, or be consistent in your craft, you can't dabble in the work every now and then; of equal importance is the need to dedicate oneself to the endeavor. When I started to take my writing seriously—quitting my job so I'd have more time to write—my father gave me some advice: He said, essentially, that the first ten years would be the hardest, and if I wanted to write poems I should write poems and not let myself get too caught up in the business of writing or get overwhelmed by rejection and therefore write for someone else.

Q: There are many boundaries and margins in this collection – inside and outside, the self and other people, time periods, city limits, and so on – but the title Fence Line connotes both boundaries and links. Can you explain a little of what the title means to you?

A: It's definitely a boundary and unifying element for me. By using the fence metaphor I suppose I attempt to echo Frost a bit. But unlike Frost's farmers meeting at the stone fence and walking its length and repairing it together, in the Midwest, or at least the part where I grew up, farmers used to meet at the middle of the fence line that separated their land and shake hands; let's say if my thumb pointed south and my neighbor's thumb was pointing north, I would be responsible for the upkeep of the shared fence to the south and my neighbor the upkeep to the north. There was still the meeting and the shared property, but the work was done on one's own. Of course, no one wanted to have a hole in his fence where his or his neighbor's livestock could get through. A poorly built fence said something about you as a person.

The fence is an important boundary and division, but it's also a place that is shared. Whenever I cross a border I think about that instant in which I'm in both countries or states at the same time. It's a split second, and meaningless I suppose, but it exists all the same, and if people thought a little more about this shared place they might get along a little better.

Of course travel comes into this for me too. I love coming into a city on a train. It gives me the opportunity to see the development of a place in reverse. In the Midwest there's a definite edge of town in that you can walk to the edge and see nothing but open fields and acreages beyond. That doesn't happen in urban areas; on the contrary, there are many cities that blend into other cities, connected by roads or trains; these same roads and trains dissect and unify them.

Q: It becomes clear through your work that people cannot easily be separated from their experiences and memories, and that places are tied to memories of events. "Here you were run over by a tractor./There you shot at a rabbit four times." Is this something you enjoy exploring?

A: I suppose I enjoy it about as much as I enjoy breathing. I mean, I don't know if I really think about it. I just observe and store up experiences and images without thinking about it, and this practiced observation informs my writing, and ultimately who I am as a person.

I can't imagine being unable to tap into my past experiences. Even though I no longer live on a farm, or in Mexico or New York or Boston, those experiences have made me who I am, the writer I am. And I suppose that when I live in a place, I try to own that place, internalize it. When I travel I like to walk the streets and alleys and get lost. A kind of tension arises, especially if I'm with someone who isn't looking for this kind of experience, that makes me more aware of what surrounds me. It's overwhelming but when I have lived in a place I feel like I've actually spent a lifetime there, as if I'm from that place. I'm not a tourist just passing through seeing what I'm 'supposed' to see but a native of the town and country. This makes for a richer life, not a mundane one in which I'm on the sidelines.

Q: The poems in this collection are often self-contemplative, but through your memories you show the different reactions we have to experiences as we reach different points in our lives. Do you believe there is a single "self" we can make sense of?

It seems to me there is a single self, but it's made up of several past selves. When I say past selves, that past is almost immediate. Everyday I'm acquiring a new level of self, and I hope I continue to do so until I die. I guess it has something to do with being awake and open to what is happening in the world. If you're an observant and feeling person you can't help but be influenced and affected by everything that touches you.

It seems to be impossible to be all of one's self all the time. I can't be an English professor with my mother-in-law, mostly because she doesn't speak English, and she doesn't really care about the job I have; she wants me to be happy and eat well. I don't think there's anything wrong with having the knowledge of different selves and adapting to a situation according to the situation. That doesn't mean that I'm going to become a Republican when I'm surrounded by Republicans, or that I'm going to sacrifice my beliefs so some moron doesn't feel bad. It's important to be empathetic, but also important to be aware of who you are and how you became that person.

Q: While your poems contemplate your own feelings and memories, you also focus on the thoughts and actions of other people and on small details of your environment—squirrels, leaves, specific sounds, smells, colors. Are you conscious of being drawn to detail, and do you see yourself as an observer?

Definitely. Just the other day I was in the car with my father and we were stopped at a light and I did what everyone does—I looked at the person in the car next to ours. Just a quick look, but in that glance I saw that this guy had six fingers. Of course it doesn't take long to see something that out of the ordinary, but there was something about the way he dangled his hand out the window, the meticulousness with which he appeared to care for that little extra finger that seemed to say a lot about the guy, enough for me to have an idea of who I thought he was and an understanding into his life. Maybe that isn't a great example. Yes, I look at the details. Part of that is genetic—my father is quite meticulous, as was my

grandfather. “If you’re going to do it, don’t do it half-assed,” my grandfather used to say, which might be translated as, “Do the job, but do the whole job.”

I don’t think you have to be a writer or a poet to pay attention to details; you have to be aware of what’s going on in the world.

Q: Love, or the relationship between two people, plays a large role in this collection. Would you call yourself a romantic?

A: I wouldn’t, no, but maybe I’m responding to how being romantic is often considered a negative attribute. Much of this book was written when I was apart from my wife and friends. I spent a fair amount of my time thinking about them, wishing I could be with them for company and companionship. Even though I’m a fairly solitary person, I find myself wanting company, especially for a meal, someone to talk to, to tell what I’d seen during the day.

But there’s also the other side of romanticism, that fascination with the possibilities of what the world has to offer; “Everything is an event for those who know how to tremble,” Jean Follain wrote. But I think he’s also saying that one is aware of these events due to outside actors. I write because of an event, but also to reexperience that event; in that sense you need two actors: one has an emotional response, then writes, and the result of that writing recreates an event/emotional response for the reader.

Q: You have traveled and worked in many places. Do you think in some way you were trying to be “like the man I saw twenty years ago...heading away from where I stood”? What led you to return to Iowa?

A: I’ve met a lot of people who are from a place but no longer live there; it’s important to get out into the world and see things. That poem is a mini autobiography; the cornfield next to Interstate 80, the foreign language, the heading away from where I stood all became me.

My family was filled with foreigners—my grandfather from Germany, my paternal grandmother from Wales, my father an artist in a small town, cousins who seemed to be from another planet. My father would take us on summer trips, my sister went to Germany when she was in high school and came back with stories and pictures of these kids just like us and I thought, “I want to do the same. I want to see this for myself.” I’m also fascinated with language—sounds and nuances—and I like to mimic what I hear. If you do that long enough your language begins to change. When I lived in Spain I worked with British English speakers, both from the UK and from Spain. That and speaking Spanish most of the time affected my English; I’d come back to the US and have doubts about which preposition to use, how to construct a phrase; even now I sometimes use Spanish syntax unconsciously when writing an English phrase.

My return to Iowa was fortuitous. I didn’t want to return; in fact I thought I never would once I moved away after college, but my wife decided to get her Ph.D. at the University of Iowa. When we moved back I spent a lot of time in the car driving to and from work on two-lane highways through the country; they made me slow down and see the landscape. I’d matured since the last time I made those trips. I think it’s important for one to get away if he wants to see what he has in front of him.

Also, I had the opportunity to spend the last years of my grandfather’s life with him; our relationship improved; we talked a lot and he began to realize I wasn’t a directionless bum, dabbling in poetry and academics, but a serious adult he could depend on and talk to. We acquired a new respect for each other, which comes out in many of these poems, that may not have existed had I not moved back to Iowa.

Q: Referring to the view of your neighbors sleeping as you eat your breakfast, you write, “if only television could offer such subtle entertainment.” What do you think poetry can offer, as a view of life, that television cannot?

A: There’s not subtlety on T.V., is there? Everything’s explained and tied up at the end into a beautiful ‘solved’ story. Poems aren’t necessarily like that. There’s no laugh track, either. The reader gets it or doesn’t, but the good poem isn’t necessarily going to tell someone what to think or how to think, like television does, like this government does.... Also a good poem gives attention to language and imagery. I suppose there’s good television, but I haven’t seen it.

Q: What do you personally get from writing, and what, if anything, would you like readers to take away?

A: When I write I am thinking on the page; I’ve been moved to write by some event. I’m usually preoccupied by it to the point where it’s hard to think about anything else. The process of writing helps me figure out what I’m thinking about, what’s moving me, preoccupying me, making me want to change my life, maybe. It’s an exercise in seeing, expression and communication. I feel passionate about things and writing is a means to explore that passion.

I want readers to carry with them a shared experience; I want them to have a reaction other than just closing the book and going on with their day unaffected, like turning off the T.V. and turning out the light and falling asleep. I’d like someone to read these poems and stay awake for a while thinking about the people who are/were significant in their lives: Riff on that beautiful woman in the car driving away, or that couple asleep tangled in their limbs next door and learn from these experiences. Learn to see the details and embrace them and think of how these minutiae can add to one’s life. I don’t think that’s asking too much. That’s what I want poems to do for me. I just hope my poems do that for the reader.



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