

An interview with Gary Fincke, author of

The Almanac for Desire: Poems

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Interviewed by Kevin Rabas



Q: A number of the poems in this collection appear to draw upon your childhood and youth, especially in “The Dark Angels” section. Wordsworth said, “The Child is father of the Man.” Tell me more about this personal, familial element in your work.

A: I don’t plan it that way, but inevitably where I come from and who I come from works its way into my work. My background is blue collar. I grew up around Edna (in Pennsylvania). My father was a baker (as in “The History of the Baker’s Dozen”). It was literal.

The cultural element is very German. My parents were very much church people. And even though I didn’t grow up to that sort of commitment to organized religion, I would say the blue collar work ethic and organized religion: These are what drive these poems.

Q: How did this collection evolve? Tell me a little bit about how the sections are structured and connected.

A: It started with a long poem called “The Natural Method of Dog Training.” At first I put that up front, and it began with all long sequences like that.

I gave up that idea. (laughs) It was ambitious to the point of discouraging readers, maybe. I think I had the good sense to go back and say, “I want the reader to hear my voice at the beginning of the collection.” So that’s why I started out with the highly autobiographical poems. I follow these by poems that begin to spiral away from the straight-ahead narrative.

Q: I am intrigued about how forces such as religion, science, history, and pop-culture intersect in your work, such as in “Save, Economize, Repair, Arrange.”

A: Everything’s available through association. I started school as a pre-med. student, which was kind of a bad idea. (laughs) But all of my early education was in the sciences.

I think the fairest thing to say is nearly every poem I write is in character or place. It’s the same way with my fiction. In the poems I have the freedom to let them find their own direction.

I’m still a pop-culture follower. My son is in a rock and roll band that just signed a national contract. I’ve been a pop-culture fan all of my life, except for the pop-culture of writing—because that’s what I do. I have no interest in popular writing. The lousy short stories and so on . . . But that “junk culture” is available for formal study. It’s

still a part of our natural history, which works its way into my poems.

Probably the historical side of it is this. Because of the accident of being born into the Cold War, atomic bomb testing and so on finds its way into my poems, along with an anti-authority attitude. I was a student at Kent State, where they fired into the crowd. So that skepticism of authority was given to me by history.

Q: Tell me about why you choose to write in the narrative form. Tell us about your thoughts on the resurgence of the narrative form in American poetry.

A: I don't know if I even do it by choice. That's what I do. Almost always. I almost always begin out of people. I like people. I like people with songs. So that's what draws me, always.

The people who influenced me to write poetry, I can tell you right off. I'd never even thought about writing poems, I'd never even thought about myself as a writer, until I discovered poets like James Wright and Philip Levine. When I happened upon these writers, I said, "Damn, you can write about this!"

I've been listening to these voices all of my life, and I never thought about writing about it. I had access to all those people and places, and narrative freed me up to do it. So, I'm thankful for narrative, although it's not such a conscious choice.

Q: What's at stake in your work?

A: I'd like to say "everything." I hope it varies from poem to poem. In nearly every poem: belief. I'm trying to get a handle on whether any of this matters beyond the event itself. I wish I shared my father's acceptance of everything. But since I don't, I have to struggle to believe in something beyond who we are at the moment.

This shows up in my poems. In every poem, characters are bombarded by outside and internal threats.

Q: What are some things that are important to your work which I have neglected to bring up?

A: Almost all of these poems are Western Pennsylvania/Pittsburgh poems, although I haven't lived in Pittsburgh in over a couple of decades. I grew up there. And those first 25 years of life are the most intense ones, and they're also the years in which I wasn't a writer. You get enough material in those first 25 years to write for the rest of your life.

One of these poems is about the death of my mother. She was inclusive of everything. She really did have all of that stuff (as in "Save, Economize, Repair, Arrange"). She was trying to hold onto everything. She had a big, big influence on my work. The importance of everything: She passed this on to me. My father passed on his work ethic. He'd go down with the ship. And now I understand where he was coming from.

Also, I got my mother's sense of the world: Every little thing carries some importance—some of it absurd.