

An Interview with David Rigsbee, author of *The Dissolving Island*

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Interviewed by Kevin Rabas

Q I was intrigued by the references to music and painting in this collection. I especially liked "Sketches of Spain," which mentions Miles Davis and has a reference to Spinoza, and I was wondering...

A. ...how I got those two people in bed together? I don't know. I wrote that one out in California at a place called the Djerassi Foundation, which is a wonderful artist's colony started by a novelist and chemist named Carl Djerassi. While I was out there, I wrote a bunch of poems that were really the basis of this book. The Spinoza part is easy because I have a degree in philosophy so I work some of those philosophers in there from time to time—I don't know why. It darkens it a little bit, I guess.

It was one of those times when I was in a zone and did a lot of writing. Bear in mind, this is 1989—which shows you one thing about this book: A lot of the poems are older than they seem. My publishing career has always been out of sequence. This book was going to be published by three other publishers. And in each case the editor came to grief.

I began to feel the book should have a warning like a cigarette pack. It's like that movie about the video: You consider this book and you'll drop dead in a week! In fact, the last guy did drop dead just before the book came out. So, this is to say that the book would normally have come out a decade before.

The music was the music I was listening to in California—like Miles Davis. I've always liked artists—I'm married to one.

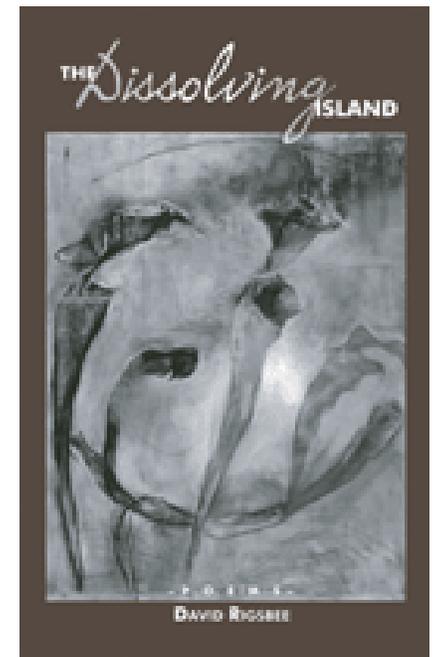
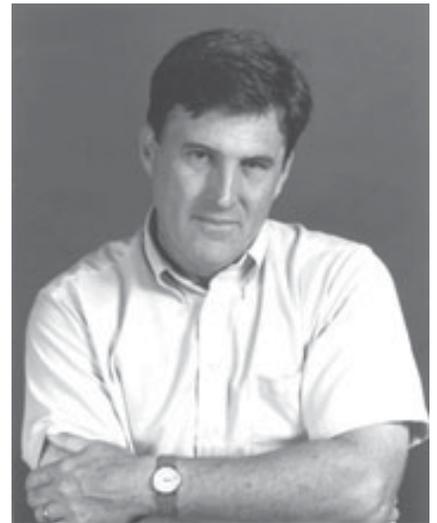
Q. What does your wife do?

A. She's a painter, and she did the cover of the book. She was a finalist for an Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters last spring. She has a gallery here in Raleigh where she shows regularly. This is our third cover together. All I do is go into her studio and look around and say, "I'd like this one for a cover." I've got the next five books planned! But anyway, the paintings and the poems get filtered in through her. And the music—my father was a musician—an amateur musician, but he was quite good.

Q. What did he play?

A. He played everything: trumpet, saxophone, piano, anything brass, anything with a reed. He wanted to be a jazz musician, but he got married, had me, and I stopped him from being a jazz musician. But he used to do things back in the '40s and '50s with swing bands and so forth. So when I was quite young I was turned on to this world of music. I guess it's a kind of secret homage to work music in that way.

Q. I noticed you did a book on Carolyn Kizer.



A. The first book, in fact.

Q. How did that influence your work?

A. She was a good teacher. She was very strict. She was like my father, in that respect. He was that way about music. She was that way about poetry: you don't fudge; you don't cut corners; you pay attention to details. You stay with basics: stay concrete and clear—all these things that sound so obvious until you try to write!

Certainly you have this urge to be significant-sounding, and of course these things are always committed and paid for by your language. They're always done at the expense of clarity and good taste. It seems so anyway—certainly for a young writer.

It's so easy to murder a poem by filling it up with ideas, and it gets dyspeptic after a while. It doesn't work. You still have to remember that whatever freight you're carrying inside the poem, it's still just a matter of language.

That's one of the things studying the philosophy of language taught me. When you come right down to it, it's just marks and noises, in Richard Rorty's phrase. It's about pushing words around on a page. That doesn't mean I'm trying to trivialize the role of language. I'm just saying that language must come first in order to make it a good poem. Ideas supply ballast, but they can't carry the poem. As a poet, you can't make a poem with the notion that its ideas are so swell that it wouldn't matter if the poem were a lousy poem, since the ideas keep it powered up. That will never happen.

Q. I notice a sense of memory and loss in 'The Dissolving Island.' Especially in a poem like "Sketches of Spain" that ends with "the best days painted black/ that won't come back."

A. Yes, that's the Spinoza poem you mentioned, the one with Miles Davis. It's one of those California poems. I think a lot about memory. It turns out that a lot of American theorists think about memory these days too because the idea now is that people are historicizing memory, in the sense that memory is not just something that belongs to people individually—any more than their identity does.

But I'm interested in just trying to feel around to see how poetry intersects with memory altogether because poetry creates a public memory. It starts from private sources but ends up being a public memory. Private memories are not good in poems because people can't share them any more than they can really share their dreams.

My wife and I have recently, because of an illness, started to disburden ourselves of things like books. So many books! We've just finished filling fifteen boxes of books and we're not even done with the hallway!

We were packing fearlessly and at one point I told Jill as we were bending over, getting back pain together, I said I used to think the greatest thing you can do on earth is write a book. And I still believe it on some level, but when you look around you realize that your little, skinny book is surrounded by a sea of massive books, all very detailed. And we're throwing them out! It really cuts you down to size!

But I still believe, as a matter of principle, that writing a book is a great thing. I think it's because when I grew up, we didn't have a lot of books. My dad was a musician, not a reader, and my mother was not a reader. I didn't get into the habit of reading until I was in high school. And when I discovered what that was I thought it was really cool. As I say, I still do. My students are of another opinion, though. Some of them are impressed. They say, wow, you've written a book? What's it about? How long did it take you to write? Kind of sweet questions...but to others it's just a big yawn. I might as well have said I've put a new logo on my T-shirt. That's how much it's worth.

It seems like the good reactions are either sophisticated reactions in which people think it really is good in some limited, well-defined way—as I do. But a lot of people have the "gosh" reaction—which is also what happens when they come up to you and say, "Aren't you the person I read about in the paper who just published a book? Wow, that's really amazing!" They go overboard the other way. But in the middle are all these people who are frankly indifferent. That's really the majority. That's a problem all American writers and poets face in spades because, Billy Collin's fans

aside, practically no one reads poetry. It puts the people who do read you in the slightly difficult, but aesthetically pleasing, position of overhearing what you have to say.

Q. Are there things you want people to know going into your book? I wondered, for example, about the title.

A. The title's not obvious. The dissolving island's an idea I got once listening to a lecture on Shakespeare. The person who was talking referred to Othello as a "dissolving island," a person as a hermetically sealed man who was being, like the Venice where he worked, systematically nibbled at along the edges. I thought that was a good image for the ego. You start out being very full of optimism or full of some kind of ambition that hasn't had any chance to correct itself, and as a result you can't fit in a social way until you've been able to recalibrate your size. You know, what it is, is just a title about solipsism, about trying to realize no privacy can be redemptive, finally. All of our redemptions happen when we turn outward. And so I wanted to start with that idea that the island doesn't stay an island, and when it dissolves, presumably, it returns to the ocean. It's naturalized that way and in fact disappears. What I was also thinking is that if your conception of yourself is of an island, you need a new metaphor. Then you're going to be happier and more mature. That was the idea.



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