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Interview with Fred Alsberg

by Jim Silver

Jim Silver: Tell us about the history of *Westview*. When and how did it begin?

Fred Alsberg: *Westview* was founded in 1981 when a grant was obtained to create a center for regional studies. Originally, the magazine was a joint project of the History and Language Arts Departments, but after a few years the historians lost interest and the magazine became a regional literary journal under the editorship of Leroy Thomas. Following his death in 1992, I was appointed editor and took the magazine in its current direction. Oddly enough, it was only after I retired as editor in 2004 that I learned the name *Westview* had been borrowed from a nursing home.

Jim: Has the administration been supportive of the project over the years?

Fred: As *Westview* has been publishing for twenty-four years and much of the expense has been borne by the university (subscriptions have helped greatly in this regard too), I would say that they have been quite supportive. After all, the magazine is old enough to vote and have a glass of wine with dinner. Additionally, when I became editor, I inaugurated the *Westview* Writers' Festival. Here the university provided the funds as well for various guest writers to do readings of their work and teach creative writing workshops for our students. The readings have been open to the community free-of-charge, and the classes have been invaluable to our students. Part of our mission as a state university is to provide cultural opportunities for both our students and people of the region. I believe the administration takes this responsibility seriously, hence *Westview*, the Writers' Festival, and many other cultural activities that take place all over campus.

Jim: Do you have fond memories of particular Festivals or guest readers?

Fred: Virtually all have been enjoyable. I'm thankful to the many writers who have taken part.



Fred Alsberg

I guess my favorite reading was by my former teacher, Miller Williams. (First, because the selection of poems was so appealing; second, because he read them so well; third, because he drew over two-hundred people to his reading and received a standing ovation of remarkable warmth.) The party afterward was entertaining too.

Jim: You did a series of interviews with visiting writers. Which of these was your favorite?

Fred: Again, many writers have made wonderful contributions. One does stand out, though. Walter McDonald's observations about the craft of writing were so insightful that I find myself utilizing them in my classes every semester. I'd recommend they be re-printed in creative writing textbooks galaxy-wide, with appropriate mention



of *Westview*, of course. I would add that he taught a great workshop class while he was here as well.

Jim: A look at the evolution of *Westview* shows that the journal really came into its own in the volumes under your editorship, in terms of appearance and content. What factors did you consider most important in putting together an attractive and engaging journal?

Fred: Well, thank you for that assessment. I'll address those separately.

Regarding appearance, I sought to learn from others who had been engaged in the production of literary journals. I studied the formats of many long-established and elegant magazines. From these sources I borrowed here and there, then added some variations that reflect Western Oklahoma to create the present format. My objective was to present the work of our authors in a way that was easily readable and respectful to their creations. I don't like to crowd poems together, for example. I don't like illustrations that overpower and thereby adulterate the writing. Illustrations should serve as accompaniment in much the way a piano ideally sets off a singer. I confess I love fine paper. I love simplicity, clarity, and cleanliness of presentation.

The color covers of photographs by Mike McKinney and Stuart Harrison have greatly enriched our presentation as well.

As to content, editing a magazine is much like being a collage artist. One hopes to bring stories and poems conceived separately into an unforeseen harmony. When I became editor, I opened up the magazine to writers from outside our region. *Westview* has published many of the finest writers in the Southwest. We get wonderful pieces from around the country and occasionally an international contribution. Locally, we've had outstanding submissions from the community and even provided a venue for some gifted students. Cole Rachel and Cathy McCraw come quickly to mind. Please don't ask me to name my favorite contributors because there have been just too many

wonderful pieces published, and when I re-read an issue I admire different ones anew. I would be remiss, however, if I didn't mention Robert Cooperman's generosity in allowing us to serialize his book-length works.

Jim: Having retired as editor, what do you think you will miss most about the role?

Fred: I guess the fun of seeing the latest issue arrive. I also enjoyed getting mail from around the country, and the festivals were fun. Of course, I still plan to attend those in the future. Jim, I think I'm creating the impression that I did all the work on this magazine alone. Nothing could be further from the truth. Without the tireless efforts of many co-workers nothing would have been accomplished. I'd like to thank each of them and the university for having given me the opportunity to work on such an exciting endeavor. Know that I wish you personally and the magazine continued success.

Jim: What do you intend to do now with all the extra time at your disposal?

Fred: I have received a list with the demands of at least a hundred competing activities. In all seriousness, though, I hope to allot most of that extra time to my own writing. Being an editor is to be an impresario of other people's talents. I have no regrets in this matter. I've liked showcasing the works of fellow writers; however, I also want to see what I am able to accomplish in my own writing. Now will be my chance.

Jim: Do you think editing a literary journal has influenced your own writing in any way?

Fred: A good question and one I've asked myself over the years. Reading so many submissions has alerted me to certain realities of publishing. First, you are engaged in a competitive sport. You must produce work that is stronger than that produced by the vast majority of other writers. The percentage of acceptances is small when compared to rejections. To this aim you should be engaging from the first line, even the title if possible. It's a matter of producing a good first impression for an overworked editor. Ideally, you then build



without making missteps to a climactic ending that is memorable and makes the editor set your work aside.

Jim: Who were your mentors while you were in the MFA program in Arkansas?

Fred: I had quite a number of different teachers, but by your term mentor I suspect you mean which professors were particularly influential. The two who played this role for me were Miller Williams and Jim Whitehead. Not only did they influence how I view the craft of writing but also the way I would later teach. Allow me to make some observations. I found both of these gentlemen to be encouraging without praising anything which was not praiseworthy. They challenged preconceptions yet allowed me my own direction. Each possessed a fine mind and a kind heart, and they were always focused on the work at hand. I'd add that I was always taken seriously and treated with respect. What more can you ask of a professor? Or a friend for that matter? I'm glad that Miller is still producing poetry that I very much admire and which I believe will endure. As for Jim, who passed away not so long ago, I have to believe that he's somewhere dashing into some classroom to challenge some assertion made by a young writer during the previous class. That's how much he cared.

Jim: Why does twenty-first century America seem to have little interest in poetry?

Fred: Yes, the common lament by poets that the public is ignoring us. While it's true that poets face increased competition for the public's attention from TV and movies, something we can do nothing about, the greater problem is that the modern public views contemporary poetry as being rarified far beyond the reach of average folk. What we poets view as subtly rendered observations about our very own lives, they view as so much high-falutin lingo that never quite gets to the point. There's a disjunction. Even when poets wear the guise of a third-person perfect-servant, who is everywhere apparent but nowhere obtrusive, we come across to those not of us as self-absorbed. Whether inten-

tionally or not, we seem a bit inconsiderate to the very people we hope will read our work, and this has helped reduce the audience for poetry today to primarily other poets. If other poets, or ourselves for that matter, are the audience we wish to write for, obviously the question at hand is of no significance, but our work will continue to diminish in cultural importance. If we wish to be read by those who aren't themselves poets and influence a culture which at the moment has never needed poetry more, I would recommend, let's just say for variety's sake, more persona poems where the speaker is not well-educated, middle-class, and ever so decent and responsible. I would recommend poems which have identifiable meanings. And no, I'm not talking about homilies you can hang on your wall, but meanings that exist beneath the surface for the reader to discover, carefully extract, and hold to the light. Additionally, I'd recommend subject matter and diction accessible to present-day Americans, such as was utilized by poets as different as Frost and Bukowski. (I mention Frost, because with his "easy wind and downy flake" he was probably the most popular American poet of the twentieth century, and Bukowski, because last time I was in Barnes and Noble I noticed he had about fifteen books for sale, an enormous achievement for someone who, like the rest of us, has to compete with novels, TV, movies, computer games, etc.) Of course, poems of the type I am suggesting are being written today, wonderful poems, but they make up too small a percentage of what is being published to affect the public's overall impression of poetry.

I also find it ironic that we are a generation of poets who takes such pains to avoid being didactic, yet all too frequently we lecture by means of tone. And trust me: people know when they've been lectured to, even when they're not quite sure how it's been done or what's been said. Writers of poetry, I believe, should be interesting and meaningful while still being respectful to intelligent people who don't have specialized training in our



field. Fiction writers seem to know this. Movie screenplay writers seem to get it. Song lyricists are in the know. They are ever aware of audience, as was Shakespeare. To target a wider readership, poets need to consider the interests and feelings of this potential audience when we compose, edit, or judge. (Isn't it their time and attention that we are seeking?) I remember a story about the Spanish poet Lorca being particularly moved when he came across an illiterate guitar player on the street singing one of his poems to guitar accompaniment. My point is that once we are a little less exclusive in terms of tone and subject matter, and assuming we write poems that climb rather than cling, our work will be more attractive to those who don't write poems themselves.

Jim: Do you remember the first poem you got published? What were the circumstances?

Fred: Yes, I'd just finished grad school. I knew I'd forgotten something I needed to do. Ah yes, send out poems. Actually, I was overly timid I have to admit. I now know rejection helps me hone my work. It lets me know that my poem isn't good enough — not enough fire or defective in some way. By sheer luck I had two poems ("Baudelaire's Mistress" and "Paperweight") taken by *Blue Unicorn* the first time I put some poems in the mail. Since then, however, I have experienced the so-called boomerang effect (rejection) many times. It's been helpful as sometimes I've subsequently re-drafted and improved poems that were later published

elsewhere.

Jim: In your own role as teacher of the art of writing poetry, what lessons do you consider most important for students to learn?

Fred: To be honest, I still consider myself a student of the art of writing poetry. However, your question deals with what beginning writers need to learn first. I would say that one has to learn to write using the language of the senses, what Mary Oliver calls "the five rivers flowing inward." Also one has to learn to listen to the sounds and rhythms of the words and not just understand their meanings. If one can come up with good metaphors/similes like the little boy who said, "When I hit my funny bone, it feels like ginger ale," one is fortunate. Much must be made of the necessity of reading masters of the past without being content just to imitate. Ultimately, writers must become a synthesis of their sources and hopefully employ what has cohered in the service of invention.

Jim: What goals do you have for yourself as a poet at this stage of your career?

Fred: Your last question is an easy one. My goal is the same as it has been from the start, and I suspect won't change — namely, to write one book of really good poems. By this I mean that, considering the idiosyncratic nature of poetic taste, I produce a book that a reasonable number of reasonably intelligent readers will find highly gratifying.

