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# AN INTERVIEW WITH MARK SANDERS

*Fred Alsberg*

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**Westview:** What are the sources for your poetry?

**Sanders:** The sources for my poetry are many, ranging anywhere from digging for fossils to nuclear holocaust. I suppose the predominant sources, though, come from the personal experiences I have had the fortune or misfortune to experience. These poems include the blessings and curses of being a father, of blissful and failed love and marriage, of childhood, of parents, of small town life. Sometimes a secondary source might be the many poets I read; more than infrequently, something that I read by Randall Jarrell or Karl Shapiro, for example, might cause a connection to something I have had buried in the image attic.

**Westview:** What type of poetry would you say you write?

**Sanders:** Type might be construed as a number of things. Do you mean form or do you mean content? I suppose I am a writer of free verse, though as a literary critic whose concern is form, I am very conscious of the form of my stanzaic, rhythmic, or metric freedoms. Robert Frost's comment that free verse was like playing tennis with the net down is true inasmuch as a poet is careless or plays without rules. I play with rules in mind. Now, on the other hand, if you mean content, my poetry is generally a poetry of loss, of the significance of life that slips away from us and of the perseverance that compels us to continue.

**Westview:** What are your poetic influences?

**Sanders:** I wrote my doctoral dissertation on metaphor in the poetry of W. B. Yeats. So, obviously, Yeats is an enduring influence. In fact, I recently found a first edition of his *Wind Among the Reeds*, and forked over an embarrassing amount of money for it. I wouldn't have bothered had he not been important to me. William Carlos Williams' sensuous energy had a profound poetic and personal effect upon my life; that is, he has shown me how important passion is, even for the smallest of things. I have also been influenced by



Karl Shapiro, the Pulitzer Prize winner whose reputation has been sadly slighted in recent years; Karl is my poetic grandfather, the teacher of two of my poetry teachers. And then there's Maxine Kumin, Robert Bly, Wendell Berry, the Nebraska poet Greg Kuzma, Don Welch, Ted Kooser, William Kloefkorn, the black poet Langston Hughes, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, Sexton, Plath, and so on. My own poetry library is made up of nearly one thousand titles, so there's one thousand influences.

**Westview:** What elements go into making good poetry?

**Sanders:** Go back to the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, and read Ezra Pound's "A Few Don'ts for an Imagist": 1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome. Pound added some additional rules in the introduction of *Des Imagistes* in 1915: 1. To use the language of common speech, but always the exact word. 2. To create new rhythms, encouraging though not requiring free verse. 3. Absolute freedom of subject matter. I might add one to Pound's list. Don Welch's desk once had a sign taken from a fish market that read, "Keep it fresh." There's nothing worse than a poem that stinks, including dead fish.

**Westview:** What makes good subject matter for poems?

**Sanders:** Anything, though the poet ought to know it inside and outside and from as many angles as possible.

**Westview:** Why is it often so difficult to pin down the meaning in poems being published today?

**Sanders:** The poet fails to consider the transcendent quality of verse, that poetry is an art medium for the people. What happens is that poets write too much of the closet sorrow or pleasure in the obscure terms that only they can understand. If the poet's symbol or image is of such obscurity that it cannot be understood by the people—and I believe accessibility is essential in good poetry—then that particular poem should have just as well stayed in the closet.

**Westview:** Should a writer write, then, for the general populace, the literary community, magazines, the future, or himself?

**Sanders:** As I just stated, accessibility is the key. If the poem is accessible, despite the fact it may be laden with allusion, symbol, archetype, the provincial, and so on, the writer can reach all audiences. Actually, this might seem very simplistic on one level, but it is actually a grand feat to be able to honor so many audiences with one good poem. I think it was Frost who said that he wanted to have one unlodgable poem in the language. He certainly did that, and more than once, too. The common reader can understand it, hence "The Road Not Taken" read at Kennedy's inauguration seems appropriate. Furthermore, the literary community has been writing critical essays and dissertations on Frost for years. Magazines continue to run special editions devoted to Frost, and the future has continued to embrace him, even though he has been dead for thirty years. I would guess he wrote for himself. When he said that the reader was a kindly gentleman who wanted the poet to succeed if not for himself at least for the reader's sake, I assume he meant himself, too, gentleman poet and farmer that he was.

**Westview:** What are the most difficult poems to write?

**Sanders:** The ones that hurt because the pain is too fresh. It's very hard to control the poem when the pain still controls you. For example, my son was born with a deformed left hand. It tore me up, the cruelty that birth sometimes imposes upon the innocent. I never wrote about that pain until years later, when he was six. It took that long for me to control the agony I felt over it, though the idea turned in my head from the day he was born. The end result was a poem called "Hands," which was originally published in Canada and was later reprinted in the States.

**Westview:** Do your poems usually begin with an objective or do you discover your objective through writing them?

**Sanders:** I think writing is discovery. William Stafford wrote that we must revise our lives, and the objective of the poem is to discover the revision of ourselves as we travel through the dark of the poem.

**Westview:** A final question: Should poems possess different levels of meaning?

**Sanders:** Yes, definitely. I view the poem as a work of art, not unlike a vase. As in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," we can walk around that vase or urn and see a variety of pictures or interpretations on its surface alone. But what about the form of the vase? It compels us to walk around it, to study its shape. It asks us to analyze the way the thing has been fired and from what raw materials the porcelain was made. Then, if we are truly curious, and we have exhausted the freeplay of the pictures and of the shape and texture, we might even want to look down into the vase's mouth, to lift its lid, so to speak, and see its internal mechanism. Has the inside been given a coating? Or, is there dust in there, and what is the significance of that dust?