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Interview: Keith Long

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INTERVIEW :

KEITH LONG

Fred Alsberg

Westview: Both your poetry and fiction are showcased in this issue of *Westview*. How do you decide whether a topic should be addressed through poetry or fiction?

Keith Long: I don't believe it's the topic itself that has any bearing on that decision as much as my intentions with that topic. Sure, there are topics that lend themselves to one or the other, but I really believe that a writer can tackle any topic with either of those two genres. As far as that goes, a writer can use drama, screenplay, exposition, or any other type of writing to cover just about any topic. One of the best copy editors I ever had in the newspaper business once told me that when I'm writing an editorial or a personal column, that I should intend for the reader to either laugh or cry — but don't make him think. "If you do, you'll wind up like William Buckley: highly revered and rarely read."

Poetry, then, is the medium I use to make people think. People don't sit down with a newspaper to do any heavy pondering, and people don't sit down with a book of poetry for light reading. I write fiction to make people think, too, but the material I publish in *Westview* is from my column writing, which is intended to be lighter and more enjoyable reading.

Westview: Do you have a preferred genre to write in?

Long: Right now, screenplay is the most intriguing form to me. It's the hardest to be successful in, and I'm beginning to understand why. A writer has to visualize everything — everything. He has to visualize the paintings on the wall, where they are on the wall, the angle of a fork lying on the table, and whether the catsup bottle is full, half-full, or empty. The writer has to visualize whether the characters are left- or right-handed, whether they are bearded or clean-shaven, whether their shirt is long-sleeved or short-sleeved. Then, after visualizing all that,

the writer has to convey on a sheet of paper what he sees. It's not easy. It's the toughest form of writing I've done so far, but it has helped sharpen my other writing, especially my poetry, I think.

Westview: At what point did it dawn on you that you wanted to be a writer?

Long: I don't know that it has. I do remember that in grade school — the fourth or fifth grade — I received an electric football set for Christmas. I would lock myself in my room and play a game against myself, keeping statistics on each play, and then when the game was over I would write a story about it. I'd go to the newspaper and read about real games and steal some of the words and phrases that the writers used. I learned what words like 'ramrod,' 'blitz,' and 'stellar' meant by doing that. All through high school I wanted to be a sports writer, and then in college I got my chance to do so at the Ada *Evening News*. In a couple of years I became weary of that, and that's when my attention turned strongly to academics. I wanted to write something of substance. Now, because of the illness I've been through, I'd like to write something about the lonesome pain of disease — something that people could relate to and appreciate without having to experience. I know there's a whole world out there in constant pain of one sort or another while most of us remain clueless about it.

Westview: You mentioned your illness, which is kidney failure. How else has that influenced your writing?

Long: I took a fiction-writing class my first year in graduate school, and I had to write two short stories. I still have them somewhere, and it really aches to get them out and look over them. I was 23 at the time, and had absolutely nothing in the world to write about. Both of those first stories contained a lot of action, a lot of thinking, a lot of posturing, but no story. They're just words hung together in cumulative sentences. I got sick at age 25, went on dialysis for three years, received a transplant, and then went back to graduate school. I won both the OSU fiction and poetry contests the very next year because I had something the other writers didn't — experience. I've been blessed through this illness because I've been given the chance to experience emotions and agonies that most people usually don't face until they're much older. I've been told that I was dying and I had only about a week to set my life right. This evokes an emotion that cannot be duplicated by any other set of circumstances; it sets off a process of quantifying

and qualifying my life that most people don't live to write about. The illness is making me a better person, and because of that, I think it's making me a better writer.

Westview: What do you tell students who aspire to be writers?

Long: I tell them to practice. It seems to me as though most writers expect everything they write to turn into something publishable. They never just practice writing, as a basketball player practices free throws and a baseball player practices his batting stance and swing. A lot of students come up to me and say they just aren't any good at writing. The reason, of course, is that they've never written. They couldn't make a free throw the first time they shot one, either. I believe writing is a talent that must be cultivated, just like any other talent. When I was sports editor of my college newspaper, I became friends with the tailback on the football team. He was great, and he still holds rushing records for that school. One day we were talking about some other players on the team, and I mentioned that it was sad that they were wasting their talent by not developing a strong training schedule. "That's nothing to waste," he said. "Now, if it were a real talent, like your writing, that would be a thing to waste." I had admired this guy for what he had, never thinking that I had something he could admire.

WESTVIEW: How much time do you spend writing?

LONG: It varies with my work load and my health, but one thing is for sure — rain or shine, I'll have a column ready to fax to my hometown newspaper by four o'clock every Tuesday. The columns are only about a thousand words, but in a year's time, that's 52,000 words. Over the course of 12 years, that's more than half a million words. The columns aren't always great, and some of them don't meet my expectations. But it really is good practice for my writing, because many times during the year I'll be staring at a blank computer screen at 2 p.m. on Tuesday with absolutely no idea what to write. And then, two hours later, I'm faxing a column that I'm satisfied with and that blossomed from the smallest kernel of an idea. It restores my confidence and helps me realize that I can write about practically anything I want.