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## Interview With An Oklahoma Writer: Mark Spencer

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# M A R K

## INTERVIEW

*Interview  
With An  
Oklahoma  
Writer :  
Mark  
Spencer*



BY VIKI PETTIJOHN

In response to a question about his technique, fictionist Mark Spencer replies, "I feel that all I need to do—all that any writer needs to do—is to create some interesting people and put them in motion, doing interesting things. And of course there has to be a certain coherence in their actions, significance in what happens to them." Create interesting people he does—a coven member from Lawton named Becky, a professional wrestler and bigamist named Samson, failed baseball player Lon Peterson, Vicki, a tough blond who sells "Santo Gold" jewelry at a nearby flea market, and Buck, a young farmer who loses his hand to a combine.

The care he exercises with characterization is the direct result of a shift in emphasis: "I used to be a lot better at narrative movement when I couldn't develop character; my interest shifted from plotting to characterization, and so now I don't think about plotting. I don't worry about it."

**Viki Pettijohn:** You are a writer of short and long fiction, an author just breaking into the public eye. Is the novel dead?

**Mark Spencer:** No.

**VP:** How do you answer someone who so asserts?

**MS:** Usually they're the kind of people who like novels and authors I don't like. They like John Barth—I don't like John Barth. I tend not to like much of the experimental stuff in the 60's

# S P E N C E R

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and 70's. I think metafiction is interesting to a very limited degree because it's fiction about fiction; experimental work simply draws attention to itself as artifice, and I think it is legitimate to do that—it raises questions about the nature of reality, about what truth is. But there are only so many stories you can write about a writer writing a story about a writer writing a story.

VP: So where are we going after metafiction?

MS: What happened in the 70's is that fiction writers started writing about other things again. Raymond Carver had a lot to do with short story writers switching from metafiction. Inevitably writers and all artists return to writing on, or creating in the medium they're working with, the subject of people. People are the most interesting subject that writers can treat. Human relationships are so rich, so complex, with endless possibilities lying in the conflicts within and between them. . . . At the moment 'gritty realism' is holding firm, according to my agent and people in New York. Even the incoming administration may add to gritty realism's popularity, with Clinton coming from Arkansas.

VP: Your work, which is gritty and real, has been compared to Carver's; who are the writers you admire and/or emulate?

MS: Well, my agent and my editor at Ballantine's do not think my work is like Carver's. For one thing, Carver's not a particularly humorous writer. Tobias Wolff has been a very consistent writer. . . the writers that I really admire are Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Wolff, Jayne Anne Phillips. I think I write

about people similar to Mason's, but I've tried not to imitate anybody. I like fiction that has both pathos and comedy. . . the kind which can move the reader to tears and make him laugh, and especially the kind of fiction that can do it almost simultaneously. Novels like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Catch-22*, and *The World According to Garp*. Even if the novel is otherwise touching and honest, if there's no comedy in it, it's not quite real. It's not quite the real world, and not completely honest, because comedy is part of life. Life strikes me as somewhat absurd, and some of the absurdity is funny.

VP: So would you say, then, that the purpose of your work, or the basis of it, is mimetic?

MS: I think of myself primarily as an entertainer, actually, but on a higher level than what television sitcoms may do. . . . One of the pleasures that we all derive from serious literature is the sense that we're being told the truth about life. And so that's what I try

to do, to tell the truth, to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of thinking and being.

VP: Lon Peterson in the title novella of your collection *Wedlock* (Watermark Press) is a good example of such complexities and ambiguities. Where did he come from? I know he seems to be your favorite character in that collection, and that you continue tracking him in your current fiction, much as Updike does the central character in his *Rabbit* series.

MS: In the fall of 1985 it came to me for the first time to write about Adams County, Ohio, and the first piece was "Home," about Lon Peterson's return when his father dies. I have always felt a strong aesthetic attraction to Adams County, where my family owned a farm when I was 12 or 13. It is the poorest county in the state; on the fringes of Appalachia, it has more in common with Kentucky than with Cincinnati, only 60 miles away. It's a place of failing farms, mobile homes, unpainted shanties, and bootleggers—it's a dry county. I was very intrigued by the way people lived around my folks' farm, fascinated with their poverty; I found poignancy in their financial struggles and their attachment to the land. In the summer of 1985 I remember the interruption of normal programming one evening by the announcement that Pete Rose was about to break Ty Cobb's record; the excitement of it got to me, and I recorded the moment with my VCR. I started thinking of all the boys and young men who dream of doing what Pete Rose did, of the millions who don't meet their goals and dreams. What happens to them? Especially those who fail dramatically, who fall tragically short of their goals. Lon came out of that. He gets as far as the minors and then flops. He has just enough success to make the dream seem real.

VP: W.P. Kinsella gave *Wedlock* high praise in his *Vancouver Sun* review; do you think that the emphasis on baseball caught his eye?

MS: Yes, I tend to think he came across it because he read somewhere that it had to do with baseball. He talked about the compassion I seem to feel for my characters. Certainly the juxtaposition of Pete Rose's success with Lon's failure emphasizes the poignancy of his situation. In "Home" he comes back to his father's farm for the first time since he failed in the minor leagues, hoping to get his life together, perhaps to sell

his father's farm. He has an ex-wife there he wants to see.

VP: Is the Peterson farm like the one your family owned?

MS: Yes, it's set way back from the road, and there's a long, winding, rutted drive going up to it—it is the Peterson house in *Wedlock*. There's a small farm house in the shadow of a huge, traditional red barn. The landscape is hilly and lush; it's hard to grow corn and soybeans on land so hilly, so many people have a small tobacco patch and they live on that and public assistance. The men are emaciated, very gaunt in the face. It's "the county of three-fingered men."

VP: What do you mean?

MS: Well, so many people there have lost limbs and digits to accidents. The motif of missing limbs and body parts is very much a part of my forthcoming novel *Hiding*.

VP: And certainly a central issue for the short story "Hands" which is based on a section of that novel.

Spencer has said that he is interested in doing some screenwriting, preferably adaptations of his novels for film. When asked the name of a director for whom he might want to write, at first he is stymied, but he quickly responds, "Horton Foote would be a wonderful director for something that I've written." He adds, "I would like to have John Cougar Mellencamp play one of the characters. I feel a certain aesthetic kinship with him; we're both interested in similar things. If I were a musician, I'd be John Cougar Mellencamp. I like to think if John Cougar Mellencamp were a writer, he'd be me." Spencer plans on discussing his screenwriting future more seriously soon with people who can help him in Hollywood. Perhaps he'll have his chance to work with Horton Foote and John Cougar Mellencamp. One thing's for sure—he's a novelist with a future, and he's come a long way from his first novel the summer after first grade, a hundred-page story about a gangster who died on page three ("I wrote big and drew a lot of pictures").

Works by Mark Spencer:

*Hiding*, a novel. Ballantine, forthcoming.

*Spying on Lovers*, fifteen short stories, forthcoming.

*Wedlock*, two novellas and three short stories.

Watermark Press, 1990. ■