

The Other
23[&] a Half
Hours

Or Everything

You Wanted to Know that Your

MFA Didn't
Teach You

CATHERINE OWEN

The Other 23 & a Half Hours

BOOKS BY CATHERINE OWEN

Catalysts: Confrontations with the muse

Cusp/detritus: An experiment in alleyways

Dark Fish & Other Infernos

Designated Mourner

Dog

Frenzy

Seeing Lessons

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The Wrecks of Eden

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Introduction

The hardest thing about being a poet [is] knowing what to do with the other 23 and a half hours of the day.

– Max Beerbohm as recollected by Billy Collins, “Words, Words, Words”

Poetry is a way of life.

– Robin Skelton, *The Practice of Poetry*

When I first started writing I was very young, about four or five years old. I had no idea of what a writer did but write. And, of course, read. Even by the time I was in my late teens and giving my early poetry readings, my vision of the writer’s life was confined to the romantic image of the poet ensconced in their garret. That poet was interested only in churning out the next poem, perhaps submitting it to a magazine or press in hope of publication, and undertaking readings, which seemed to be required for a poet in

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the twentieth century. It wasn't until my mid-twenties that I really started to enlarge my vision of what living the life of a writer or a poet means.

Of course, the writing is paramount, publishing is essential and recitation is vital, but these are not the only pacts you make with your art when you assume the strange mantle of a poet in North America. Our business-driven, almost wholly prosaic society attempts to convince all of us that creating art doesn't matter, that it's irrelevant and that the poet has little contribution to make. Or, as with the general mandate of M.F.A. programs, like the one I briefly attended in the summer of 2011, that writing poems is bound up in a source of employment and prestige. The underlying message is that composing poetry leads to a teaching career and that to obtain and keep that job one must "publish or perish" along with other academics. Such an expectation can frustrate artists in many ways. It can convince them to stop writing and detach them from the possibility they can make an impact on the world, or limit their work to acts that lead only to professional ends. More often than not, poets are told that the only way they can use their talents beyond writing itself is by teaching others. Important as this career path may be, there is a vast array of additional options for the poet who wishes to expand the boundaries of their art, contribute to their community and experiment with the fusion of genres and mediums to imagine whole new artistic visions.

The books that most poets and writers tend to read about their artistic practice concern themselves with the act of writing and getting it published. They have titles like *Writing Poetry*, *The Practice of Poetry*, *The Poet's Companion* and *Some Instructions on Writing & Life*. These guides all contain writing exercises and marketing tips. As

useful as such texts are, *The Other 23 & a Half Hours* sets out to present a very different type of book. Over the last fifteen years or so, I have engaged in a range of artistic practices beyond writing itself. I have memorized poems, spent extensive time on scholarly research and written reviews of my contemporaries' publications; I have run two small chapbook presses and co- or solo hosted a half dozen performance series; I have worked with musicians, photographers and multimedia artists both alongside and outside the poem; I have held slightly weird jobs such as ad salesperson for a tattoo magazine and production assistant in film and tv; and I have travelled to parts of Europe, Mexico and the Middle East with the aim of learning about art from other cultures. A while ago, I began to ask myself, why have I done all these things? What have they contributed to my art and to the artistic community itself? Why do I feel these ways of being in the world are so important?

Armed with these questions, I began to pay attention to what other Canadian poets were doing in the community, noticing in the process the extensive range of activities many are involved in. Thus, I decided, over the course of several years, to interview fifty-eight Canadian poets on these practices, adding others I haven't undertaken myself to any serious extent, such as translation and running a radio show. I wanted to know what they did to make poetry matter in the world, whether they allied themselves with the university or the "streets," regardless of whether they self-identify as lyric or language poets, surrealists or formalists. As I spoke to the poetic community, I was filled with awe at how much we are all undertaking, often for very little remuneration or attention, to imbue the art with energy and a diversity of engagement. *The Other 23 & a Half Hours* is not a teaching text. It lays out no program, presents no

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assignments that will lead to grades, promises no path that proffers a potential job and prestige. Instead, this compendium is a journey of sorts through the experiences poets have as they go about making their art and seeing what can happen to it when they maintain an eternally questing mind and a generous dollop of attention.

Whether you call yourself a poet or a writer, are just beginning to write or have already published a book, have a full-time job and family or have chosen to be entirely committed to the writing life, *The Other 23 & a Half Hours* wants you to know there's more to writing than just writing, that you can be part of an energetic, demanding and fun as hell community of people who want to make poetry matter beyond the page. Get ready for a blast of truly rewarding "sweat equity."

School or the Streets?: The M.F.A. versus the World Debate

The Other 23 & a Half Hours is subtitled *Or Everything You Wanted to Know that Your M.F.A. Didn't Teach You*. Where am I going with this? Am I suggesting M.F.A.s are unnecessary or perhaps even harmful approaches to writing? And that this book is a more apropos mode of learning things about writers and their community because it's random, encompassing (though not completist) and exists outside academic criteria? No, not entirely. The subtitle is, in part, a serious critique of what can be missed out on if one chooses to focus solely on getting writing degrees, then submerging oneself in the academic milieu; the perils of making writing "inseparable from its institutional context," as paraphrased by Chad Harbach in *n+1*, and part a poke at the notion that any one source, whether a degree

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or this book, will instruct you in everything you need to learn as a poet. As Donald Hall stresses, “All coterie associations . . . limit the possibilities of change and growth.”

Taking my own history as a case in point (though can it ever be?), I started writing at around four years old just after I learned to read and wrote avidly throughout my childhood and adolescence in whatever genre appealed. At sixteen, I dropped out of school. Returning to complete a bachelor’s and master’s in English literature by the time I was thirty, I eschewed creative writing programs of any kind, feeling they would impose a shape on my writing routine and sources that would seem inorganic to me, while allowing myself to take the occasional workshop: with Patrick Lane in Sechelt, BC, over the course of four days in 1993; another time, in 2005, through the tutelage of George Elliott Clarke for ten days at the renowned Sage Hill Writing Experience in Saskatoon, SK.

Workshops, unlike academic writing programs, usually only last a brief time, from several hours to a few weeks, and often allow the “student” to apprentice under a writer they admire, enabling them to learn more readily from their experiences and perspectives rather than from a textbook or exercises. Most of the writers I interacted with – from my ex-husband Chad Norman to Al Purdy, Phyllis Webb, Ernest Hekkanen, Jamie Reid, Dennis E. Bolen, Goh Poh Seng, Joanne Arnott and so forth – seemed to have more iconoclastic modes of composition and of earning a living too. My goal was to write as much as possible while obtaining a paycheque in almost whatever way I could.

Starting in 1998, I began publishing trade books of poetry. My method of approach to poems was often research based but free, I felt, of any confines relating to “publish or perish” or “produce to

please.” Then, in 2011, after my spouse died unexpectedly, I suddenly felt fear clench me. I was getting older, rapidly, it seemed. How would I survive as a poet in the future? This anxiety propelled me toward the M.F.A. program at the University of British Columbia (UBC). I attended, as mentioned, for ten days, the creative non-fiction course, during July. And I was struck, first, by the fact that not only did several of the instructors not have M.F.A. degrees, but had been hired (as one should be) on the basis of their writing, not their academic achievements, and second, how most of my classmates had published little and appeared to be doing a degree to achieve greater compositional discipline and, yes, to get a job. Panel discussions revolved around what journals to publish in, how to compose a cover letter and tips for dealing with post-M.F.A. terror. Although I appreciated some of the commentary on my personal essay, I realized within a few days that this was not my world and I would have to seek survival elsewhere. In the M.F.A. program I felt as if I was backpedalling and discounting all I had learned up to that point by simply writing and living and trying to make community with other artists.

The Other 23 & a Half Hours began here. I know M.F.A. degrees work beautifully for some poets by offering them the chance to influence other writers and make a living in the process but I still question their motives, their results, but mostly, their hegemony. Certainly, getting an M.F.A. is not the only way to live in the world as a poet.

Historically speaking, M.F.A. programs haven't been around that long. The first course in creative writing was offered at the University of Iowa in 1895. Then, in 1936, Iowa launched the Writers' Workshop and began awarding the first M.F.A.s, according to Louis

Menand in an article for *The New Yorker* called “Show or Tell: Should Creative Writing be Taught?” Post-WWII there was a sudden upsurge in demand for university programs in every subject, including the arts, and the creative writing field burgeoned from this movement toward professionalization. In the US more than in Canada (whose first M.F.A. program wasn’t launched until 1965 by Earle Birney at UBC), and particularly over the past decade or so, M.F.A. programs have come under critique. One reason for this may be their incredible growth. As Chad Harbach points out in “MFA vs NYC,” there were “79 degree-granting programs in creative writing in 1975; today there are 854!” Pearl Luke’s website, *Be a Better Writer*, lists seventeen universities offering M.F.A.s in Canada and the numbers are swelling, with some institutions like the University of Calgary even offering a Ph.D. in creative writing. Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, which focuses more on fiction than poetry in terms of the postwar proliferation of university writing programs, discusses some of the other reasons this may be the case.

The root issue is money, of course; who makes it, who truly benefits from these programs and, extending these questions, how, as McGurl notes, “the more important financial relationship between writers and the academy is about *teaching* creative writing, not studying it.” In other words, the aim is to equip writers with connections that enable them to publish and thus, by adding to their academic credentials, to obtain sources of employment. It is not to educate students on how to read *per se*; on the difficult, mysterious craft of composition or other aspects that lie outside what can be taught, especially by an often ill-equipped workshopping group led only provisionally by an instructor. Graduate writing degrees may

also change how the author views publishing. Harbach states that, in relation to fiction at least, “for the MFA writer, then, publishing a book becomes not a primary way to earn money or even a direct *attempt* to make money. The book instead serves as a credential.” While poets rarely produce books hoping to make money, the creation of a collection should still be so much more crucial than adding to one’s credentials. The bigger issue, as reviewer Carolyn Kellogg addresses, is whether, “institutionalizing a creative endeavor benefits our culture” (quoted in Jamison).

One of the most vociferous critics of the M.F.A.-dominant system is Raymond P. Hammond, whose book, *Poetic Amusement*, launches a relentless attack on poets who “professionalize,” claiming that university courses in writing exist to “demystify” the art, in the process ousting the muse, glutting the publishing market with mediocrity and putting pressure on poets to produce simply to get and keep jobs rather than due to essential internal dictates. Poetry should be written, Hammond asserts, from a sense of tradition and poetic stewardship, as well as personal obsession, not from superficial contemporaneity, a desire to “get ahead in the game” and external “prompts.”

Of course, nothing is ever a simple dichotomy. Very few writers are wholly a creation of either school or the streets. The poets in this book range from an esteemed anthologist and professor in creative writing, Gary Geddes, to a liminal writer without degrees at all, Mark McCawley; from a former office worker, Sandy Shreve, to a rancher, Garry Gottfriedson, to a psychiatrist, Ron Charach, and almost everything in between. Yet, our society is inevitably moving toward an emphasis on credentialization for almost all jobs, with even the manager of a waffle house, as Carl L. Bankston III pointed

out in a 2011 article called “Adrift or Foundering?” being required to hold a degree in this day and age.

As Leslie Jamison underlines, “cultures are heavily cross-bred, and . . . each of these distinct ‘cultures’ is in fact composed of multiple forms of attachment to a single economic engine (the university or the publishing industry),” while Harbach determines that “it’s time to do away with this distinction between the MFAs and the non-MFAs, the unfree and the free, the caged and the wild.” Thus, within whichever kind of constraints, academic or “the streets,” there remains a whole host of practices that encourage the writer to value, celebrate, transform and articulate what it means to create in the largest sense, beyond attention to end results or the final return on one’s “investment.”