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ATG Interviews Don Beagle, Library Director, Belmont Abbey College

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Library Director, Belmont Abbey College, Belmont, NC

by Barbara Tierney (Head Research and Information Services Department,
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BT: Your new book of poems, *WHAT MUST ARISE*, newly published by Library Partners Press (@ZSR Library/Wake Forest University) has already received high praise from a major name in American poetry — X. J. Kennedy. To quote from poet X. J. Kennedy’s advance review: “...*WHAT MUST ARISE* is worth the wait: an achievement both impressive and hugely enjoyable. Donald Beagle has the rare ability to involve the reader with the poem, revealing that things of which we haven’t been aware deeply matter to us. This book will surely be among the outstanding poetry titles of its year, if not, indeed, of its century...” — X. J. Kennedy (1/12/17). Does that sort of superlative response gratify you?

DB: Well, to be clear, I’ve never met X. J. Kennedy, though like probably every other literate person with a college degree I’ve read his work often, so yes, it is gratifying. A great plus of Mr. Kennedy’s blurb is how his stature puts him beyond peer-group psychology and poetic politics. I mean, some readers may not like certain poems or my entire book and that’s fine. Readers differ and tastes differ. But I still recall how one issue of *POETRY* back in the 1980s ran back-to-back reviews of Radcliffe Squires’ *Gardens of the World* and Brad Leithauser’s *Hundreds of Fireflies*. At that time, the reaction was “meh” for the former and raves for the latter. Today, views of these two books would, of course, be sharply reversed. Looking back, one suspects Helen Vendler’s early boosterism of Leithauser played an unacknowledged political role in influencing reviewers’ assessments. This isn’t meant as an attack on Leithauser’s work, which I admire as a whole. But *Hundreds of Fireflies* was his youthful debut volume (and showed it), while *Gardens of the World* was Squires’ sixth mature collection, and in many ways, the pinnacle of his achievement. Passing years have only reinforced that book’s lofty stature; Dana Gioia’s landmark essay in *The Atlantic*, “Can Poetry Matter?” makes specific reference to Radcliffe Squires.

BT: How did you start writing poetry? Were you young?

DB: I was five years old when our family sold our urban bungalow and moved to the Michigan countryside. Our adopted township of East Liberty was so rural I attended a one-room school: 35 students, grades one through six. Thus, by the end of first grade, I was reading at a sixth grade level, and never looked back. The busy streets of early childhood gave way to forests, creekbeds, corn fields, hay-rides, apple orchards. At six, I started writing nature verse; at seven, began to play our Yamaha grand piano. These twin passions — writing and music — shaped my creative growth.

BT: Did you continue writing poetry during your college years?

DB: East Liberty is only an hour’s drive from Ann Arbor, but the road to my final graduate school years at the University of Michigan — with 35,000 students — was long and winding. Those summers spent in nature brought a kinship with 19th century authors: Whitman and Dickinson, Emerson and Poe. My B.A. in English at Oakland University (Rochester MI) helped me take that leap to the 20th century, from Eliot to Frost, Dylan Thomas to Sylvia Plath. In fact, my EN Honors Thesis on allusions to *Dracula* in “The Waste Land” was published (in part), and is still being cited 40 years later. I loved creative writing classes for the camaraderie; the chance to hear and be heard.

But I distrusted rule-bound pedagogies: “In poems, use modifiers sparingly; three verbs for every adverb.” That sort of dictum never moved me. In one sense, I try to let each poem speak of and for itself. American poetry has been “all over the map,” stylistically speaking, for over 50 years now. That is why, on reaching graduate school, I bypassed the usual MFA, rejecting a career of “teaching” creative writing. I greatly admire my writing faculty colleagues, but critical theory remains, to me, largely unpersuasive, except when tightly coupled to historical, linguistic, or socio-cultural perspectives.

BT: Did you study with any poets who especially influenced you?

DB: In the senior year of my B.A. program, 1974-75, I did my first independent study with Margaret Kurzman. She was frankly a better mentor than poet, but only because she left us, sadly, far too young, too early to reach her natural maturity as a writer. But she was a brilliant, insightful reader and facilitator of student writers. Her empathy and focus were extraordinary. I think even her obituary photograph conveys her remarkable presence. The title of my new collection, *WHAT MUST ARISE*, is a slanted tribute to Margaret’s first collection, *BECAUSE CAPRICORN RISING*. Her book was published by New Voices Press, then based in Detroit, which I think of as a sort of early forerunner to the library-based print-on-demand digital imprints such as High Wire Press and Library Partners Press, which of course is my book’s publisher. In 1976-77 in Ann Arbor, I did one last independent study in



Left: Margaret Kurzman, Oakland University. Credit: photo-print gift from Margaret Kurzman to Donald Beagle. Right: Radcliffe Squires, University of Michigan. Credit: from Wikipedia article, “James Radcliffe Squires.”

poetry, with the afore-mentioned poet and critic Radcliffe Squires. Underappreciated today, Squires cautioned me against all academic “isms.” I followed Squires’ stunning poetry through seven books and his historic reading for the Library of Congress’ Archive of Recorded Poetry & Literature (April 1977). That same year, my own student collection won top prize in “major poetry” category of the Avery

Hopwood Awards, giving me validation to write only for myself by letting each poem speak for itself. And I did, years later, try teaching on the side for a couple of years, as I taught a poetry workshop at Duke University’s Continuing Education Department. But struggles with vocal dysphonia led me to focus more on my chosen career directing libraries.

I continued to write poems, and occasionally submitted and published in journals. But for the most part, my poet-self became a “desk-drawer hoarder.”

BT: How would you describe your work stylistically?

DB: I love subtle explorations of poetic form: distributed slant rhyme, assonance, interspersed alliteration. By “distributed rhyme,” I mean rhyming that emerges from the internal adjacencies within the poem’s phrase-structure rather than belaboring predictable a-b-a-b line-endings. A school of poets called “new formalists” is out there trying to revive the a-b-a-b tradition, and that’s fine. But to my ear, poems by many “new formalists” now seem a bit affected and precious. Yet, I also recognize that the “new formalists” have often pushed back against an anemic postmodernism I also dislike. (Was any anthology ever more aptly titled than *Quickly Aging Here?*) Some poets who speak to me: Laurence Lieberman, Natasha Trethewey, X. J. Kennedy, Emily Grosholz, James Applewhite, Jean Burden. And of, course, Radcliffe Squires. The stylistic focus of many poems in my new book concerns strategies for embedding lyrical expression and symbolic imagery in narrative frames. I also often use adjacent paradox, or juxtaposed contradiction. One poem describes sitting in a concert hall waiting for the music to start as a “brief eternity.” Another describes the street life of Manhattan as “momentous trivia.”

BT: So how did this new book, *WHAT MUST ARISE*, reach publication?

continued on page 30

Interview — Don Beagle
from page 29

DB: A couple poet-friends roughly my age — **Frances Pearce** of Charleston and **Ralph Earle** of Raleigh — both published well-received small-press chapbooks in 2016. A small press chapbook (generally 47 pages or fewer) has become a fairly typical format for many new poets' first collections. So I started sorting out a subset of 45 pages from my larger manuscript, planning to follow the same path to submitting a small-press chapbook. But at a **Charleston Conference** presentation I learned about this new academic imprint, **Library Partners Press**, established at **Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University**. My interest was sparked, of course, when Editor **William Kane** announced his desire to do some poetry collections. So I returned to the full-length version of my manuscript and sent it in. But I must stress, my poems had already won multiple academic awards, and had been published in recognized journals from *Carolina Quarterly* in the south to *Lake Superior Review* in the north; from *Agora* on the east coast to *Blue Unicorn* on the west coast. I just feel extraordinarily fortunate to have my first collection issued as a full-length book from an academic press at a major university. It seems a perfect fit, since I've been directing academic libraries for 20 years, and a tenured full professor for a decade.

BT: So having spent 20 years on the faculty at a Catholic Benedictine college, **Belmont Abbey College**, has that impacted your poetry, either in form or content?

DB: Very much so. I would say that numerous poems in **WHAT MUST ARISE** are examples of a poet "in dialogue with" or "in conversation with" Catholicism, rather than being attempts to write "Catholic poetry" *per se*. In some poems, such as "The Shroud" and "St. Someone," these conversations are direct and central. In other poems, such as "The Stone," "Mr. Paley and the Pocket Watch," and "Hypatia Comes to Chapel Hill," historical and socio-cultural aspects of Catholic (and Anglican) faith form a more general backdrop against which these poems unfold as lyric narratives. For example, "The Stone" personifies and interrogates certain imagery and symbols from **Ingmar Bergman's** famous film, *The Seventh Seal*. The film, of course, concerns a crusader knight, **Antonius Block**, who returns from the Holy Land only to see his faith tested by the plague ravaging his homeland. And my poem "Mr. Paley and the Pocket Watch," was developed by reading the arguments made by advocates of so-called "intelligent design," especially **Phillip E. Johnson's** text in *First Things*. Reading **Johnson's** argument (after he once lectured here at **Belmont Abbey College**) made me go back and read the original "Watchmaker" essay by **William Paley**. After reading **Paley**,

I reached a startling realization: my academic research into information science and related aspects of complexity theory forced me to the conclusion that **Paley's** entire "Watchmaker" argument (or analogy) is, in point of fact, a *logical fallacy*. Not only that, but it is a *self-negating* logical fallacy, and I believe I can prove that in a series of forthcoming articles. But unlike **Richard Dawkins**, who as an atheist, attacked **Paley** and **Johnson** in his book, *The Blind Watchmaker*, my critique of **Paley** and **Johnson** stands untroubled by my own position as a theist — a believer in God. The crucial difference happens to be that my theism is based entirely on personal faith, and a belief that faith and reason can ultimately find common ground, without the (to me) theoretically dubious apparatus of the "Watchmaker" analogy, or misguided attempts to position "intelligent design" as its would-be successor. 🍷

Editor's Note: Don's book *What Must Arise* has been posted on **ATG's "Books from Our Crowd"** at: <http://www.against-the-grain.com/bfoc/>. "Books from Our Crowd" is our way of helping to promote books written and produced by those of you who are part of the **ATG and Charleston Conference** community. Feel free to check it out, and "submit your book." — **KS**

ATG Interviews Katherine Skinner

Executive Director, Educopia Institute

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *Katherine, some of our readers might not know much about the Educopia Institute. Can you tell us a little bit about Educopia? What is your mission?*

KS: **Educopia** was founded in 2006 as a nonprofit, 501(c)3 organization. The founders' vision was to create a nimble, efficient, and lean mechanism for catalyzing multi-institution, community-driven work in scholarly communications and digital preservation. **Educopia's** mission is to build networks and collaborative communities to help cultural, scientific, and scholarly institutions achieve greater impact.

We foster collaborative work across professionals from libraries, archives, museums, presses, and research centers. We try to break down stakeholder silos and encourage these groups to find ways to work together to achieve our common goals in knowledge diffusion and dissemination.

ATG: *Who were the founders and are they still involved? How did they come up with the name? Is there a story behind it?*

KS: Our founders are **Dr. Martin Halbert** (Dean of Libraries, **University of North Texas**), **Dr. Tyler Walters** (Dean of Libraries, **Virginia Tech**), **David Seaman** (Dean of Libraries, **Syracuse University**), **Rachael Bower** (Director, SCOUT project, **University of Wisconsin**), and **Greg Crane** (Director, Perseus Project, **Tufts University**). Their goal was to make possible extended collaborations between libraries, research centers, archives, and museums. So often, projects find themselves limited to grant-funded timeframes, and transitioning from project to ongoing program is extremely challenging. We wanted to help multi-institution projects shift from collaborative action (often trapped in a grant-funded, time-bound environment) to collective impact (longer term, sustained engagement that yields system-level results).

ATG: *Above you defined Educopia as "nimble, efficient and lean." What does that mean exactly? Can you give us examples? What trade offs are required to keep Educopia operating this way?*

KS: Simply put, it means we keep the "center" of our organization small and inexpensive by design. Our efforts are focused on empowering and incentivizing distributed networks to learn, build, and share with each other. That's very different from the traditional 501c3 model in our field, which usually builds infrastructure, services, and content that is held by the 501c3 and sold back to members. We don't want libraries, archives, publishers, and museums to be dependent on **Educopia**; we want to embed knowledge and activity back where it belongs — within those libraries, archives, publishers, and museums. There really is no trade-off in this operation style for us — we're mission driven at our core, and that mission demands that our core be nimble, efficient, and lean.

ATG: *We know from what you said earlier and from reading your mission statement that Educopia partners with diverse stakeholders and builds networks. But other than digital preservation, are there particular*

continued on page 32