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ATG Interviews Don Beagle, Library Director, Belmont Abbey College

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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 blur 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 Leithauser’s admire as a whole. But reviewers’ assessments. This isn’t meant unacknowledged political role in influencing early boosterism of Squires. 1980s ran back-to-back reviews of recalling how one issue of POETRY back in the fine. Readers differ and tastes differ. But I still like certain poems or my entire book and that’s puts him beyond peer-group psychology and plus of his work often, so yes, it is gratifying. A great response gratify you?

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 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” at 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 me, 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?

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I've been directing academic libraries for 20 years, and a tenured full professor for a decade. I've been 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 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.

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).

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.

KS: Our 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.

KS: Above you defined Educopia as “nimble, efficient and lean.” What does that mean exactly? Can you give us examples? What tradeoffs are required to keep Educopia operating this way?