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## **An Interview with D. Russel Michhimer an American poet**

**Nalini Priyadarshni**



D. Russel Michhimer is an American poet and rock art (pictographs and petroglyphs) expert who has been writing poetry for forty five years while working at a variety of jobs and traveling through much of the world pursuing his interests in the archaeology of ancient civilizations and rock art they have left behind. He has authored numerous books including novels, novellas, a poetry collection and a Guidebook to Rock Art locations. His latest book Notes to Be Left with the Gatekeeper by Global Fraternity of Poets, India, won him the title of Poet Laureate at the Dr. Yayati Madan G Gandhi International Poetry Awards.

He now lives in a secluded cabin with a two hundred mile view of the snow capped Cascade Mountains out the front window in Central Oregon and approximately seven thousand volume library he has acquired through the years. His collection of ghazals, Lotus Mirage and another collection of his early poems are due to be out later this year.

(This interview was conducted via email)

**How does a poem begin for you- with an idea, an image or a form?**

What inspires me to write a poem varies considerably. Often times it is a person, usually a female whose attention I want to attract. It's a good way to get a second date! Some times it is an occasion or a place. Such things as weddings, graduations and birthdays frequently prompt a poem. I frequently incorporate acrostics into such poems—a name or a phrase spelled out in the first letters of each line.

Nature is a great inspiration for poems. There are so many fantastic views everywhere we look and processes both dynamic and subtle that when noted evoke appreciation or awe and trying to capture them and their nature with words and verse is a constant invitation.

Sometimes an idea or an opinion about something can get a poem underway. I tend to like ideas that kind of comprehensively organize a subject or process because they give one a ready structure to base a poem on. Something like the twelve months of the year can be a chance to express one's own unique perspective on a reality we all have in common.

There are at least hundreds, if not thousands of different forms that have been used over time in different societies around the world to write poetry. Discovering new ones is a constant wonder and of course most of the time I try my hand at trying to execute at least one using the parameters of the form. Frequently there are forms that are fun to write in and many poems, not necessary one after another, ensue. Some are deceptively simple looking, once they are finished but demand some very crafty manipulation of words and ideas. Others look quite complicated when finished but are surprisingly easy to write.

Many of my poems come from a single word or short phrase that occurs to me, sometimes out of the blue. I just write it down and then something else occurs to me that goes with that and I keep on going and before I know it, there is a new poem. Those are particularly fun because I rarely know where the poem is headed in the beginning so it just kind of gets discovered as it is being written and can have surprise twists anywhere along the way. I guess writing those is like a journey where when you are finished you end up with a map of the path you took.

**A lot of your work is in strict form- from Sestina to ghazals to sedoka. How do you choose the form of your poem?**

Sometimes I am simply trying out a new form. Other times the subject matter is closely fitted to, or even dictated by the form. For example, let's say I want to write a poem for someone, maybe it's their birthday. Acrostics are always fun for that, so the first thing I do is see how many letters are in their name. I delight if it turns out to be, say, fourteen. That is the number of lines in a sonnet. And there are several kinds of sonnets, I choose a type that seems appropriate, write the name down the left margin and start writing. So I end up with a sonnet that is also an acrostic.

Now of course the more forms one is familiar with, the more likely it is there may be a form that will work. Many forms involve rhyme patterns. I am not the best rhymer in the world but with

practice one improves. The trick is to not let such things about a form deter you from trying them, but rather look at them as an adventure. Some adventures turn out better than others. Every poem can't be a masterpiece, though it helps as you write to think it might be. I just try to get it all down first, not that I don't agonize over some words as I write, but it is during the revision that one polishes and hones the words and form. I prefer to do the entire process in a single sitting. Others prefer a resting period between drafts.

I might also mention that if one is using a form effectively, it does not call attention to itself but is like a nearly invisible support structure.

### **How important is the accessibility of meaning in a poem? Should readers work hard to 'solve' the poem?**

The answer to that question is multifaceted. It is a delicate balance between being blatant, being obvious, being esoteric and being cryptic. If a poem is written in a vocabulary with which I am not familiar it would need to be very intriguing in some other way to prompt me to run for a dictionary to educate myself. On the other hand we all have different vocabularies and I have no trouble using a dictionary to learn the meaning of words I don't recognize. If a poem is full of allusions to ancient poems and writers in Greece or elsewhere, that my non classical education makes me unfamiliar with, again I am not likely to pursue it for long. If poets care about reaching an audience I appreciate it most when, if such obscure references are present, I am lead to understand by the poem itself, a preliminary short introduction to the ideas or (horrors) footnotes. Poets who do not show their readers or listeners some courtesy in helping them understand what they are trying to communicate are not my favorites and I don't think very highly of them. That is not to say that I need everything absolutely spelled out for me though, after all it is analogy that forms much of the skeleton of most good poetry and if the poet is successful it is because their use of that tool is appropriately applied.

If it is the intent of the poet to impart meaning with the poem then it as their and not the reader's, responsibility to show enough of that meaning that it can be grasped by careful listeners. Of course, good poetry has many layers of meaning and if it takes more than a single exposure to the poem to ascertain those layers all the better.

### **Do you maintain a daily writing schedule?**

My lifestyle is so different most of the time from day to day that I really don't. I do it when I have taken care of what needs to be taken care of at any given time. I do tend to favor the late hours of the evening and early hours that follow directly of the morning for writing.

### **How long does it take you to write a poem?**

That entirely depends on the poem and frequently on the form. Sometimes I can write a haiku in the time it takes to write the words down; at others I may wrestle with the syllables for fifteen minutes. Many times free verse comes just as fast as I can write it down and stops when the poem finds its organic ending. If I am writing using a form, it again depends on the form. I tend to try to write it down the way I want it the first time through, I don't do much revising; but that might mean I spend ten minutes laboring over an eight word line sometimes. I tend to like long forms, such as double sestinas, or Crowns of Sonnets and of course those necessitate spending a lot more time; several days on occasion to finish them (not working 24 hours a day of course.) Some foreign forms that I love to try, take a long time; it is not unusual for me to spend two hours writing a ten line ghazal for instance.

### **Do you spend a long time revising?**

I revise as I write so it is hard to say. Except for perhaps a word or two I rarely revise poems once I consider them finished. I am a horrible speller so revisions often consist of just getting the spelling correct.

### **Did you believe in your work, even at an early stage?**

Most of my early poems were written for various classes in community college and aside from some good letter grades from teachers didn't get much exposure. But I was living in Portland then, Oregon's largest city, and there was quite an active poetry scene of readings, open mikes in taverns and the like going on in the early seventies. I started going to some of those venues trying to figure out how to become a poet.. Through some venue, I have forgotten which, I became acquainted with Stuart "Sid" Lyman. Sid was a retired teacher who organized what he called the Portland Poetry Center and he put out a newsletter monthly with a calendar of all the poetry happenings he could gather. He asked for volunteers to help fold and address the newsletter and I volunteered and we soon had a friendship going. Sid had more friends than any one I had ever met, most of them poets. He was an extremely well educated fellow, having studied at the Sorbonne in Paris after serving under McArthur and being instrumental in reorganizing the education system of Japan. Helping him with the newsletter became a pretty regular thing and it wasn't long before he had arranged for me to give a reading. It was in Powell's Bookstore which at the time was a narrow old store crammed with wall to wall books; it would go on to become the largest used bookstore west of the Mississippi. I had an audience of about half a dozen people and I knew four of them and I was still terrified—but I did it! I was a poet. Sid had infinite patience and was the master of constructive criticism. Over the course of a couple of years we enjoyed many a gallon of cheap wine and all night discussions about life and poetry. And he had a huge cabinet full of his poems that he would share and I would share my latest efforts. In short, he was my mentor. If it hadn't been for his guidance I would probably never come to consider myself a poet. He died all too soon but sometimes I still hear his laughter echoing through my poetry. Not to belittle the influence of all the literature I studied in the

course of getting my Bachelors Degree, but I can honestly say I learned more about language and poetry from him than from all the rest collectively in my education process.

**What role does a mentor plays in the career of a writer/poet?**

I mentioned above the role that my mentor Sid played in my development as a poet. I was incredibly lucky to have found him. So a good mentor can inspire one to write more, help you learn from your mistakes and introduce you to the depths of many facets of poetry that are difficult to learn any other way. One of the keys though that makes a mentor relationship be productive is the poet who is being mentored's relentless picking of the mentors mind. That and a well developed ability to be able to listen.

**As someone who has traveled to East including India, Nepal, Thailand Indonesia etc. and your present close ties with India, what do you have to say about mysticism of east v/s Intellectualism of west?**

Well I'm not so sure that one can make that kind of distinction between the two. I have studied as many wisdom systems as I could find from cultures around the world. Not only as they exist now but how they have developed and changed over many centuries. In general, most belief systems have teachings that help with understanding of the world in which we live. Western thought has developed more along understanding the psyche via psychology rather than mysticism although alchemy for instance is closer to mysticism than it is to psychology. That is a very complex question and I find it best to not see the two as opposing forces but ones that complement each other.

**How do you think internet and social media contribute towards well-being of the poetry?**

I think they have made poetry and learning about poetry much more accessible. You can find most classic poets' works on line and many obscure ones as well. Forms or mechanics of poetry are easy to research with a couple of clicks.

It has given opportunity for many poets to share their work and get feedback on it. Of course the quality of the poetry as well as the quality of critique runs a full gamut of quality. I see that as a good thing in the long run, in that it makes poetry much more available to the world in general. I would hope that more opportunity allows more good poetry and poets to surface and have their work recognized. Of course, along with the increased amount of wheat comes a commensurate amount of chaff.

I think it will allow the rise of more poetry that takes place outside the narrow halls of academia to be aired and appreciated. As a poet I value what I learn from other poets as well as teachers and the masters. I would hope many share that outlook and experience.

**What is your opinion on self-publishing as opposed to traditional publishing?**

I feel it certainly has its place, particularly as easy as it is now a days. I think it used to have a kind of stigma about it, but it seems quite acceptable today. It is probably true that the over all quality suffers from the glut of self published material. But I think that it also increases the poet's ability to reach an audience and increases their chance of being "discovered." This is a subject both sides of which may be argued quiet successfully. Both have their pros and cons. To me, feedback on what I write is important after the fact and precious little of it seems to exist no matter what the publishing method. It should probably be noted too that few poets make much money on published works, no matter the method.

**Do you think it's possible to contain the spiritual world and also be of the "real world" in 2014?**

This is a single world in my perception and we have nowhere else to go. Whatever I have in the "spiritual" world I also have in the "mundane" world. Again, a complex question but I no longer make those kind of distinctions for myself. It is all one. As above, so below; as below, so above as Hermes would have it. And as folks who practice Zen might note, "Before enlightenment, chopping wood and carrying water; after enlightenment, chopping wood and carrying water."

**What is your advice to budding writers?**

Anyone can profess to be a poet or a writer. The thing that separates the real ones from the rest is that they write. Write, write, write and then write some more. That and study the craft. It is a craft and many have practiced it before, seek to learn from them. To not due so deprives the poet of a huge arsenal of useful tools that may be employed. Sure , there may be a select few who really do not need education in order to write decent poetry, but they are few and far between. At least that has been my experience. Reading and listening to other poets is something I include in that process of learning. Take note of what you like. Few find their own voice over night; some never do but if you don't keep writing it is guaranteed you never will. Remember too that there is not an editor who is going to come around and ask if you have a box of poetry under the bed that you would like to share. So share it every chance you get.