

From an interview with Gerald Creede
by Aaron Vidaver / transcribed and edited by Jason Wiens

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This interview took place June 23, 2000 at Corazón, Vancouver, following a launch of W2 and readings by Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Maxine Gadd, and Clint Burnham.

Creede: ...And then, one day in about 1983, I was bored, smoking a lot of pot, writing stories, getting rejected by Capilano Review [...aside re: Corazón and other drinking establishments in the area...] Most of the first readings I saw here were about 1980 – no no – '82.

Vidaver: And you met [Peter] Culley and [Kevin] Davies through a reading?

C: Yeah, probably not till late 1983 though. [...drunken chatter in back...] So in '83 I probably saw Culley and Norm Sibum, all these guys were around and I thought “I should start writing soon. None of these guys are very good.” All these guys had university jobs at the time. Guys from Prince George, guys that lived up on Sechelt, started to advocate [...drunken chatter...]

V: So what attracted you to Davies and Culley?

C: Oh they were much better than anything I'd seen in about a year.

V: You mean their writing or them personally?

C: Plus their performance.

V: What sort of stuff were they reading?

C: Jeez you know Kevin was reading stuff from that chapbook that he had...it was all very hot stuff. And Culley was reading from the book called Emerald City. I liked them both, I thought they much were better than anything I'd seen...well, the only thing I really liked was Sharon Thesen...and I liked Al Neil.

V: What Al Neil did you like, you mean his poetry?

C: Well Slammer¹ was the first thing I saw. It was about the third or fourth reading I went to see at Octopus Books, and the first ones were Sharon Thesen and John somebody-or-other, crying about how stupid his students were, and there was hardly anybody there. And he was so hammered, and I had just smoked a joint in the park, and actually I was worried: “Oh shit, this is embarrassing, there's only seven people here and this guy's so hammered he's not gonna be able to read his stuff. This old man.

V: Who?

C: We're talking about Al Neil now. It was about the third reading I'd gone to see at Octopus Books, Brownie ran the joint, there were about eight people there: Maxine [Gadd], Trudy [Rubenfield]...and so I thought "This guy's so hammered he's not going to be able to read." And then he started to read this story about walking to North Van, from Slammer, that's really great. He left the Waldorf, and walked to North Van across the bridge, really hammered and had a few small experiences. And he read it perfectly. And then he finished it and he could barely walk. And that's when I started liking him. Anyway, then I saw Peter and Kevin about a year later. And I met them at the Waldorf later. I knew Dorothy [Trujillo Lusk] by this time. And so did Peter, we were talking poetry and he said something about reading Don Juan, by Byron, and I said "it's Don Je-wan." He said "no no." But the next time he was in town he said "I checked on that and it is 'Don Je-wan.'"

V: So how did you get to know Dorothy?

C: I met here at a reading. She invited me over to a party at Scott Watson's. That was an important place; he had lots of parties where there was 50 or 60 people: poets, painters. I didn't know how much that ever amounted to anything about collaborations or anything. Never for me. But a lot of funny talk and a lot of drinking. So I met them both there, and I probably met Kevin and Peter four or five months later. Dorothy wasn't writing.

V: And where were these readings?

C: At Octopus Books. It's on tape, if you can't remember it's on tape. And that was the best place. The only other place was the Literary Storefront. And I sort of liked that wacky woman who wrote that horrible poetry who ran the place. She lived on Salt Spring Island for years. She wrote wacky stuff, but she was kind of cute.

So when I met them we talked, a few weeks later Kevin and Jan moved over, a few blocks away, we started hanging around more. Kevin mostly started giving me a lot of stuff to read and encouraging me to write more. I was just starting to write this thing from off-hand lines I had in my journal after reading...Kevin gave me *The Mind that Enters the Story*,² and sold it on the line 'I gave this to Culley to read, he read the first three lines, threw it across the room, and said this is a bit too postmodern for me.' He later came to read and

love it, a couple of years later. And so [Jeff] Derksen put me in Writing 1 when they went to the small format,³ and I expected they would be my publishers.

V: What's that?

C: I expected they would publish my stories which I was producing every few months, as their 'experimental language writer.' When they rejected my second one...I was starting to know [Gary] Whitehead by this time. I'd submitted to Writing 4,⁴ didn't hear anything for weeks. Every time I saw Derksen at the bar he didn't say anything about it. I didn't say anything about it. Finally I was taking a walk, smoking a joint with Whitehead and he says "We're not going to publish that piece." So I said "Ok, fine, I guess we're having fun again." And so when this colloquium came up they didn't ask me to that, when they really needed another language writer. And so Derksen and I drifted further and further apart.

V: So how did the phrase 'leisure poets' come into play? It was a reaction to that 'work writing' conference in '86?⁵

C: Leisure poets mostly came around because Culley and I weren't doing nothing except listening to music, getting high, and writing. But we were both writing every day. You know I'd write for three or four hours while I smoked pot.

V: But it must have been a reaction to something, & I thought it was a reaction to work writing.

C: Oh no, it must have been the starting point of this joke. And one day, it mostly came from Kevin, he was always doing something. Peter and I were just talking about how we didn't do anything that day...we got out of bed, watched Rockford Files, then we watched Hawaii Five-0, then we smoked a joint and wrote for a couple of hours.

A: Rockford Files?

C: Rockford Files and Hawaii Five-0. Not together...

A: Yeah yeah yeah – subsequently.

C: Respectively. I was living with Jan by this time...Rockford Files was on at 10.

A: What's that?

C: Rockford Files was on at 10.

A: So you'd get up at 10 and watch...

C: Oh 9:45. I didn't like to smoke a joint until I'd been up seven minutes.

Moe: How many minutes?

C: Seven minutes, eight minutes. But we were writing every day. But Davies was always doing more. And Peter and I were laughing, we didn't do anything all day except write a bit, & we were just real leisure poets. There were work poets whining about the line or the forest industry, but we didn't really do anything today. Did you ever laugh when you say to Kevin 'what did you do today?' He says 'nothing except I went to the library for two hours, and I went to the Art Gallery, and then I had an hour discussion with Colin Browne about the next issue of Writing magazine, but I didn't really do anything.' And we said 'you're not a leisure poet!' And that's how that started. I think I said it first. And Peter heartily agreed. Or he said it first and I heartily agreed. It was just a joke.

M: So what allowed you to be a leisure poet in terms of economics?

C: Well, basically both our girlfriends had jobs and we were on welfare. Which was something we had to accept and...but I tried to work, I worked for years....

M: Well my God we didn't have any real subsidies for artists except for little piecemeal things here and there...you have people in your life that are with you and also you can get that welfare cheque and you can be a leisure poet.

C: But you know it was just a joke except we would do it at the Kootenay School of Writing when we were drunk, you know, 'We're leisure poets, you guys are jerks!'

M: We were jerk poets?

C: No, they were jerks. They had ethics, they had philosophies, and they had mostly formulas for construction, that we felt we didn't have because [the writing] was all based on the Rockford Files.

[...]

V: I think that the concept 'leisure poets'...could be taken quite seriously as a way to read your work and Culley's work.

C: Well my poetry is never about getting by in life, getting by monetarily in life, trying to find the lifestyle and the occupation that would support their poetic sensibility. Culley and I were never writing about that. Because we weren't doing that. We admitted it. And you know I was doing the best I could to work occasionally...but I never work very well. I worked for five years at the bookstore...

V: At Granville Books? When was that again?

C: About 90 to 95.

V: But it strikes me that at least some of the writing really glorifies work unnecessarily. Not your work, I'm thinking about Jeff Derksen's poetry, there's a kind of orthodoxy about the dignity of labour.

C: No he believes in that. He's a mormon, you know, he's a puritan when it comes right down to it. He's the best writer around here.

V: You think so?

C: Hmmm....

V: What about Deanna Ferguson?

C: Hmmm...also a very good writer but....Well you know she doesn't sell her success like Derksen. And the more success she gets, the more she rejects it. She's always willing to accuse somebody of selling out, at a line where I see, well, there's a buck there, you know? There's a buck there so I go for it, for myself, I stretch my ethics. When somebody offers me money, the state I'm in, there's no way a hundred dollars is going to jeopardize what I actually believe, and I need the hundred dollars. And to concede a little niceness to get a hundred dollars, I got no problem with. But Deanna would.

V: What do you think of her take on Lenny Bruce?

C: Well, it's interesting. It's kind of esoteric but it's interesting. Lenny Bruce isn't that great a...he's got a small cult following, a few top pieces, like every comedian. I think he's wonderful, I think she wrecks a lot of that, the one hour and a half video that is intact, after he can't perform anywhere but San Francisco, a few months before he died. His whole act is just riffing on his bust. But it is certainly the preamble to a lot of language writing. It conveys that apparent jump in subject matter which is always very obvious, and it goes back and forth until a third one, and to understand him, he's not desperate, he's not ramble, he's not, he is just surely riffing when he spends a lot of time slipping around, that's pretty high. And she writes about that. Why are you interested in that?

V: Well it looks like, my prediction is that, well, these various people like Clint Burnham and Jason Wiens seem to write on you in relation to Deanna, your writing in relation to Deanna's writing, and to Dorothy's writing.

C: All of us have been pretty good pals for a long time.

V: Do you have anything to say about Dorothy's Redactive?⁶

C: Very readable, very fun. The best...I mentioned her, didn't I mention her when I said the best writer in...?

V: I don't know.

C: She came out with Redactive in a few months. As far as I know she'd written 100 poems already...

V: Well, there was the earlier chapbook, right? I have it right here.

C: Well, Redactive's part of it, right?

V: "Oral Tragedy."

C: "Oral Tragedy" is part of it. But this is a few months before that. And "Oral Tragedy" was the first thing she wrote I think. But that Tsunami Books was another story altogether.

V: You want to say something about that?

C: Bremner was just, 'let's do books, let's do books, I thought we were talking about books.' He wanted to start Tsunami, a few weeks after we'd been reading together and talking about poetry. And prose. I knew he was [unclear] with it. He got Árni [Rúnar Haraldsson] to do a book, and Kevin to do a book, and one of the last times our group met together, which we were doing every week, every two weeks, he was doing my book and he said "What colour do you want the cover?" And he took me out - I wrote about this somewhere - he took me out, and then I said - this is when I had the job at the Hall of Fame - I keep a journal that I sometimes draw on. I took a picture and reduced it to its smallest size, and I thought that made it really interesting, because it made it abstract to me. And so I said to Lary "I want this put over one of the pieces as a sort of illustration." And he says "yeah yeah, sure." The book comes out, and it [the illustration]'s two pages. I said "Lary, I asked you to put a small picture." He said, "Well I'm the publisher, and I thought this was better." And so that was the last time I dealt with Tsunami Books.⁷ I guess he moved to Japan after that.

V: He's back now.

C: He's back now. I hope this isn't published, I'm in real trouble. I'm worse than Truman Capote.

¹ Al Neil, *Slammer: Stories*. Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1981.

² The book Creede refers to here is Clark Coolidge, *Mine: The One That Enters the Stories*. Berkeley: The Figures, 1982.

³ It is unclear exactly which issue Creede refers to here. *Writing* went to a smaller format with issue 23 / 24 (Fall / Winter 1989), when Jeff Derksen took over as editor from Colin Browne. In that issue Creede did publish "Close to Naked," a collaborative piece with Nancy Shaw. However, *Writing* had also earlier switched to a smaller format, again coinciding with an editorial shift (from John Newlove to Browne), with issue 7 (1983). While this would account for Creede's mention of Gary Whitehead, who is listed on the editorial board during that period (issues 7-22) of *Writing* but not on the subsequent and final editorial period, as well as the fact that he mentions the 1985 New Poetics Colloquium as occurring around this time, Creede did not publish in that issue (7). Creede would not publish in *Writing* until issue 10 (Fall 1984), with his story "lark molt."

⁴ Again, note that this number may not be accurate.

⁵ "Split Shift: A Colloquium on the New Work Writing" was sponsored by the Vancouver Industrial Writers Union and the Kootenay School of Writing, and held in August 1986.

⁶ Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, *Redactive*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1990.

⁷ Not entirely accurate. Creede sounds here like he's talking about *Verbose*, a Tsunami Editions chapbook from the late 1980s. He would later publish the perfect-bound *Ambit* with Tsunami in 1993.