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Interview with Michael Cox

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Dr. Michael Cox has published short stories, non-fiction essays, and critical essays in a plethora of publications including Cimmarron Review, Columbia, Other Voices, The New York Times Magazine, and Best American Essays. He is anthologized in the forthcoming Touchstone Anthology of American Fiction. He teaches various creative writing courses at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown where he serves as assistant professor of writing.



CR: What was your initial exposure to creative writing?

MC: My first classroom exposure to creative writing was at the University of Chicago. I was a graduate student there and was already well into my 20s. Chicago, being an excellent university, actually has an excellent adult education program. My master's degree is actually in social science, but I took a lot of courses over the years through adult ed. I took a lot of courses from Roger Ebert, for example.

What was so cool about [one workshop] was that it was all adults and everyone was some kind of professional—doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, physicists, and me all together writing stories. A lot of what we wrote was autobiographically based because that's what [this professor] liked to work with. But she emphasized, too, writing in a natural voice, more or less finding your voice. This doesn't sound radical for a creative writing classroom, but it was to all of us who had no training whatsoever. So, that was really my first exposure.

I wrote from a really early age, [though] not tons. I actually originally set out to be a psychologist. My undergraduate degree was in psychology. That's why I went to Chicago. Over the years I just developed a lot of interest in writing; I was in my 20s. I really recommend the city for anyone when they're in their 20s, assuming they have their bearings.

CR: Who are some of your favorite writers?

MC: It really depends on the genre. But I like short fiction best of all. One of my favorite writers would be Denis Johnson, who wrote *Jesus' Son*. There's an-

other writer called Aleksandar Hemon. He has a couple of books out. I love George Saunders. I actually met him up at Penn State. Another writer I love is Jonathan Lethem, who writes right now. People who are big influences, like Hemingway, Kafka, Faulkner, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Jayne Anne Phillips are the people who really made me want to write.

I think there's a lot to be gained in the humanities, reading and writing and thinking. I think English is probably the best place to get that.

CR: How does having a non-literary undergraduate education inform your craft?

MC: I tend to think of sociology and psychology a lot when I write. I sometimes think of those things more than setting or character. What it gives me more than anything is freshness. In a way—and I don't mean to deride creative writing classroom training because I do it myself—I think it gives me an untainted approach to how I do these things. Although I'm grateful for what I learned about writing, I think that most of what I learned about writing I figured out on my own just by reading and writing and by learning to close read and take apart a text.

Close reading is absolutely vital. I'm sometimes stunned and disappointed that a number of creative writing students really don't like to read that much. And I don't understand why they want to write if they don't want to read. You find all kinds. There are some that just love the word. I would probably recommend literature before I'd recommend creative writing [courses] if someone actually wants to write seriously. I'm actually very conflicted about teaching creative writing. I love it—it's my favorite class in the world. But I wonder sometimes how much good we do.

Sometimes I think someone would be better off being a math major if they wanted to be a creative writer, or a physics major—or a psych. major.

CR: Do you have a writing process?

MC: I have many different approaches; it's pretty eclectic. If it's a short piece, if something just comes to me, I'll bang it out, and then I'll work with it over a number of years before I release it, perhaps. I've tried writing novels, but I don't like any of them. I think I've completed five and I think the fifth one, too, is about to bite the dust, but I'm not really sure yet. Writing a novel [...] requires daily effort and immersing oneself in it and actually being in it. I really like shorter pieces, much more so because I can let go of them. One of my teachers used to say, "You can waste three years on a bad novel. You only waste three weeks on a bad short story."

Being merciless and having merciless critics is really useful.

Just as an approach, there's a good essay by Donald Hall. He talks about the "McDonalds-ization" of creative writing, where you're turning out all those hamburger poems. He pretty much says there's no point in trying to write unless what we're shooting for is great poems. Most of us will fail, most of the time. But if we're just piddling around, trying to get published and filling classrooms and getting jobs, is there any point to that?

I'm a really disciplined teacher and like to approach things in as disciplined a manner as possible: I revise and revise and revise. And still I'm never happy.

There's actually one thing I am happy with: I'm going to be anthologized with an essay in the *Touchstone Anthology of American Fiction*. I just found out about this the other day. And it's a pretty big deal; it's like being in the Norton. I was surprised and really pleased.

But that's one of the few things—that piece—that I'm actually really happy with. And it just dropped out of the sky. I wrote it in the afternoon and revised it a little bit. You can revise and revise and revise and beat the hell out of a piece, and you still aren't necessarily happy with it. And then sometimes it works and sometimes it's great. The best stuff is the stuff that comes out full-blown; it just pops out. It's right and it's dead-on and you're in the moment and you inhabit it.

CR: Do you sometimes just feel inspired?

MC: Yes. There's an image; something hits you, a sense comes to you. You don't know where it comes from. It comes from your subconscious, obviously, or it's something you stole from the newspaper the day before, and then it just kind of follows from there. Different people have different approaches. I have a lot of ambivalence to creative writing as a[n academic] discipline. I don't know how much good creative writing programs do in the world.

CR: What role does public opinion or the critics' viewpoint play as you are writing?

MC: I need to know if something works or not. If enough people tell me it's not working or a passage needs to be worked on, I tend to believe them, although it might take me months to see it sometimes, or years. For example, last night I was reading one of my stories; there was a patch in it that's a little unfinished. That patch had been identified by good readers, and they had said something about the development of one of the characters, and it was really easy to see last night. In part, it was

easy to see because I imagined reading it in a room full of people, and when you do that—when you look at it from other people's eyes and you hear it through other people's ears—it's a lot easier to figure out if it's working or not.

CR: What is your goal in writing?

MC: I'd like to write something that lasts. "Something for posterity," which is an answer I stole from Jayne Ann Phillips. Something that would stay in publication and that wouldn't disappear and that might be taught in classrooms. Or read by people who review literature. One of the problems I have with creative writers, and sometimes with creative writing teachers: too many of them want to be loved. More than anything, that seems to be the primary motivation and seems to me to be narcissistic. I would like my work to be loved, but I could take or leave how someone feels about me. I hope people like me, don't get me wrong, but I'd rather they love the work. And I'd like the work to speak for itself.

CR: Whenever I try to write creatively, I feel that I'm just cannibalizing what I've read. I don't feel like anything I write is original. I've read so much that I think, "surely this just came from somewhere else." I'm just curious if you ever feel that way or if you even think that's necessarily a bad thing to feel that way.

MC: For bookish people, I think it's probably unavoidable. When you try to [draft] something, you have to be as unselfconscious as possible. It depends, too, on how structured your approach to the piece is. I'm not a big "plot" person and would like the story to just go wherever it can go, if it can. But I don't want to write something unintelligible, at the same time. I want to be aware and self-conscious when I'm revising and editing. Even then, I don't want to realize the influence.

I see it in my students a lot, stories that seem like pale knock-offs of something we read in class. And the student is not aware of it when he or she writes it. It's hard to avoid influence. It's impossible. I think people should be as informed as they possibly can be. I think the more you read and the more you know and the more mature you are, the better you'll write. I think people can be too self-conscious and get choked up.

One of my favorite writers, for example, is Jonathan Lethem. In his first book he very consciously blended this Philip K. Dick and Raymond Chandler style. Sometimes people do that; people borrow. I don't know how much I do. When you're writing, if you're trying to create something original, you have to not be con-

scious of everything you know, although you have to know stuff to write. You can spend a lot of time perfecting a piece, then you realize it's derivative. There are so many people who copy Hemingway, and it's not necessarily a bad thing. Faulkner, to me, is the cat's pajamas.

CR: Why do you love Faulkner?

MC: Because it draws me in so deeply and I forget that I exist when I read it. Faulkner is so absorbing to me. The flow of his mind—he'll go anywhere to try to make something happen in a book. I love the flow of Faulkner. I probably like *As I Lay Dying* the best. He's just so deeply engrossing. And Flannery O'Connor refers to Faulkner as being the greatest Southern writer, in so many ways. Jayne Ann Phillips is deeply indebted to Faulkner. Toni Morrison is deeply indebted to Faulkner. He and Hemingway are probably the two biggest influences of the 20th century, as far as American writers go. And they are so very different. I love them both, but I prefer Hemingway's short fiction and Faulkner's novels.

CR: What advice would you give to creative writing students?

MC: "Get a degree. Don't take it seriously. Move to a big city when you're in your 20s, before you get married. Have as good a time as possible. Experience as much as you can. Read and write as much as you can. And never take yourself too seriously. And don't wear black and go to coffee shops."

[laughs] I tried to make it sound quotable; I think I read that somewhere.

The different between professional writing students, who will end up in the workplace being tech writers or literary journalists or editors, and creative writing students is night and day. If I had another piece of advice, it would be to have a marketable skill. One of the things that I see in creative writing students that I think renders the degree virtually useless is the inability to grasp grammar and syntax and editing and perfection in language. Either an inability or a refusal. The strongest suit that creative writing students have—because they're going to have jobs and they're probably never going to make money from their writing, and I hope they realize that—is to get marketable skills so they can have day jobs while trying to write. It's a little bit like trying to be a rock star or a movie star in New York.

I want to encourage students as much as possible, but I don't want to give them any false ideas. Very few students have the talent and brains to maybe make it someday. It really depends on what they're shooting for.