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Dan Albergotti

*Dan Albergotti is the author of *The Boatloads* (BOA Editions, 2008), selected by Edward Hirsch as the winner of the 2007 A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Shenandoah*, *The Southern Review*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and other journals. In 2008, his poem "What They're Doing" was selected for Pushcart Prize XXXIII: Best of the Small Presses. A graduate of the MFA program at UNC Greensboro and former poetry editor of *The Greensboro Review*, Albergotti currently teaches creative writing and literature courses and edits the online journal *Waccamaw* at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, SC.*



CR: There is a sense of intimacy and rawness in your poem “Bad Language.” Do you ever find it hard to balance what could be over the top feelings with honest vulnerability in your writing?

DA: I always want my poems to be dancing near that cliff where the slightest misstep could send them over the edge into the abyss of sentimentality. And I desperately want never to make that misstep. All good poems need to have an emotional risk of some sort, I think. Without that, it’s not really poetry. But the most dreadful of all poems are those that wear sentimental emotions on their sleeves. This is one of the situations that make poetry such a profoundly challenging art.

CR: In this same poem, as highlighted in your title, the use or misuse of language can be important to a writer. Do you find the many definitions of single words to be more difficult to communicate what you mean—or somewhat freeing, with endless possibilities?

DA: For me, poetry is about trying to communicate something that is beyond the capacity of words. That’s a bit of a quixotic goal, I guess. But then again, I can think of a lot of poems that seem to

make the impossible possible. And how many times in history has the poet been cast in magical or divine terms. Language is almost too complicated to understand, and life is far too complicated for language to understand.

It occurs to me that I'm not coming very close to answering your question, but maybe that's perfect. I'm illustrating the incapacity of words to communicate my ideas on the question. I'll just add that some of my favorite contemporary poets—particularly Robert Hass and Jack Gilbert—frequently write about the inability of language to take the poem where the poem wants to go.

CR: How do you usually choose the topics of your poems? What inspires your writing?

DA: It's never a very conscious process of "topic selection." Most of my poems begin with an idea or, more typically, a line and then grow out of my obsessive thinking. The poet Natasha Trethewey encourages poets to "honor their obsessions," and I do that by allowing my poems to come without too much self-conscious deliberation on my part. My book is obviously obsessed with questions of faith and doubt. If I were to step back and think about that, I could say to myself, "Aw—that's all been covered by the Victorians." But I never step back and question what's driving my obsessions, and I think that's important.

CR: Do you write about things you know well or things you want to understand better?

DA: Both, I think. But in many ways, the impulse toward poetry comes from a desire to understand everything better, more deeply. It's an urge to know the unknowable. And I also try to caution myself toward modesty when I believe I know anything "well." Experience has taught me it's easy to fool yourself that you know everything about anything only to be painfully surprised later.

CR: How long does it take you to perfect a piece? Do you ever feel your poems are complete?

DA: The French poet Paul Valéry said that “a poem is never finished, only abandoned.” There’s a bit of flamboyant overstatement there, of course, but there’s also a lot of truth. Poets are obsessive people who are always thinking about ways that a poem could be revised, made better—even after it has appeared in print. Look at the lifelong revision Yeats did to his poems, or Whitman’s restless tinkering with his own. “Perfect” really isn’t in my vocabulary when I think about the status of my poems.

CR: Do other authors affect your writing? If so, what authors do you gravitate toward?

DA: John Keats and Jack Gilbert are my two favorite poets of all time. Others that I find very inspiring: Larry Levis, Linda Gregg, Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Yusef Komunyakaa, Alan Shapiro, Heather McHugh. I could go on, but if I got started, I’d fill pages.

CR: For a writer, how important is reading?

DA: Reading is indispensable and nearly omnipotent. The novelist Saul Bellow once offered this definition: “A writer is a reader moved to emulation.” I can think of no better definition. If you’re not reading, you’re not finding your teachers. The teachers are those who have gone before; you’re the apprentice. You must read voraciously, broadly—both in the classics and in what’s being written today. It’s the only way to educate yourself as a writer, really. Not that the classes and the classroom teachers are irrelevant—it’s just that they can only take you so far.

And then there’s karma to consider. To ignore other writers and then expect someone to care about your own writing is really, when you think about it, extraordinarily arrogant. The universe doesn’t like that attitude.

CR: In your poems, you seem to mention a lot of the classic poets like Keats and Donne. How do the classic poets influence your contemporary writing?

DA: When I read Keats, I don’t feel like I’m reading someone who lived in an entirely different time and place. I feel like he’s in the

room talking to me. That's the amazing thing about literature—it can make you feel like you're part of the larger human family in a way that cuts across time and place and culture. And this is where that voracious reading alluded to earlier comes in again. Having read Donne, Keats, Hardy, Dickinson, Hardy, Larkin, Bishop, etc., I feel like I am stepping into a conversation that is centuries old whenever I write a poem.

CR: You seem to have immersed yourself in the writing world—as a writer, a professor, and editor. Do you think it is important to be involved in many different aspects of literature and writing?

DA: It's always good to have as broad an experience as you can. When you are an editor, you are able to understand the perspective of the editor when, as the writer, you submit your work for publication. When you teach the mechanics of metaphor in the classroom, you're able to bring some of that knowledge to your own composition process when it's necessary. I've been very lucky to have such diverse opportunities to see literary production from various angles.

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

DA: Read. Read, read, read. And then write. Listen to what others have to tell you, but only accept what rings true in your heart. Alan Shapiro says that writers should have equal parts of arrogance and humility, and I agree. Be arrogant enough to believe that you can do it, that you can continue to improve and grow as a writer to the point that you produce something memorable for future generations. And be humble enough to understand that you can always learn things from others and that none of this is really about you, but about the work and how that work might help the human family grow wiser, kinder, more tolerant and empathetic. There's no higher goal.