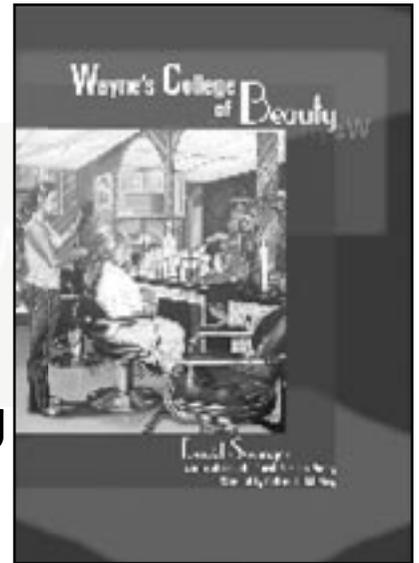


AN INTERVIEW WITH

David Swanger

AUTHOR OF

Wayne's College of Beauty



BY ANDRÉS RODRÍGUEZ

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How old were you when you began writing and why did you begin writing?

Age twenty, during a year of study in England that started out dreary and lonely, I began to write short stories. During a dreary and lonely time in graduate school three years later, I started writing poetry.

My earliest poems tried, in Susanne Langer's lingo, to give form to feeling. Later I moved away from dependence on a specific, situated feeling, and learned to write even when not immersed in an emotional extreme (usually unhappiness). I think this was a progression from being an occasional poet to being a serious one, as I established a disciplined writing schedule that didn't depend upon some specific emotion to impel a poem.

You've spoken of your poem "Wayne's College of Beauty" elsewhere, stating that it is an example of writing about what you don't know. Why did you title your latest collection after that poem?

Writing the poem was an act of discovery, and I like what I discovered in my attitude toward Wayne's College of Beauty, once an actual hairdressers' school in Santa Cruz. Empathy emerged and overwhelmed irony as I wrote the poem. The poem also expresses, at another level, my poetics. It speaks to poetry as

a way of seeing oneself and the world that can be shared.

Incidentally, I was advised by several colleagues not to title the collection "Wayne's College of Beauty." For them this title was not poetic enough.

There is a wide range of subjects in this book. Could you comment on that?

I rent a room on this planet that has many doors. Who knows who will knock, or enter unannounced? The point for me is to welcome whoever comes, and be grateful when what enters my life is both significant and surprising. This can be made into a poem—feelings toward a child, a discovery about one's parent, the persistence (or loss) of love, the shapes of sadness, the immediacy of history, and so forth.

Certainly there is a lot in the world; and quite a bit, even, in the little room I occupy.

In many poems you seem to find your subject as you go. Does that leave you feeling edified or mystified—about life or your life?

Yes. The most difficult poems for me to write are political because I know the destination as I begin

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the journey. A poem having to do with war will condemn war. A poem concerning the holocaust will despair over it. Yet I feel an obligation to attempt such poems.

On the other hand, as the question astutely observes, many poems find their subject in the act of their making. These are usually the most fun to write, and the most satisfactory in the end. And I am both mystified and edified: mystified because I do not know where certain ideas and images come from; edified because I have learned something about myself in relation to the feelings, memories or events that emerge. The last poem in this collection, "What the Wing Says," is probably my best example of a poem that works in ways I did not know were possible, as it collects a past, connects past and present, and even ventures toward the future.

Did your mother's death affect your actual writing in any way?

Yes it did. But rather than answer this question with specifics here, I'll leave them embedded in the autobiographical elements of certain poems.

Which authors have made the most impact on you as a poet?

Keats foremost—not because I try to write like him, but because he is a brilliant lyric poet, and was a man of compassion and integrity. Coleridge is also an influence, more for his poetics than his poetry. Among modern and contemporary poets, James Dickey has been important to me, as has the early poetry of Tess Gallagher. Ray Carver, who was a friend, is as fine a poet as he is a short story writer. At the moment, for both personal and poetic reasons, I am intensely engaged by the poems Carver wrote knowing death was imminent.

Keats is one poet who is important to many poets, both past and present. You mention him in "Ob Dear Ones: 9/11" and in another poem. What does he mean to you?

Consider this: I have a very narrow kayak called a "surf ski." It measures nineteen feet long by nineteen inches wide; and is so precarious that taking off my jacket, swiveling my torso to look behind me, or trying to adjust anything while at sea imperils my balance. In the distance is a buoy. By reaching the buoy and grabbing it, I can steady the surf ski, re-arrange my clothes to suit the weather, get my bearings, and for the time I hold onto the buoy, have a respite from the task of staying upright. The surf ski/kayak is the poem on which I'm working. Keats is the buoy.

You recently retired from the faculty at the University of California-Santa Cruz. What new opportunities and challenges are you finding in your creative work now as a result?

The challenge and the opportunity is the same: time. Having time to write every day is a privilege, even as it is, frankly, scary. Almost anything else I do is easier than writing; and there's a temptation to throw myself into a quotidian life, which, like my professional life before, leaves relatively little time for writing poetry.

Put another way, the challenge and the opportunity created by retirement is to assume wholly and honestly the identity of poet, rather than that of professor/poet, and scholar/poet, that got me off this particular hook before.



"Empathy emerged and overwhelmed irony as I wrote the poem."

—David Swanger