

Nate Pritts // <http://www.natepritts.com>
INTERVIEW :: Writer's Digest, December 2009

Poetic Asides // Conducted by Robert Lee Brewer

Nate Pritts is the author of *Sensational Spectacular* (BlazeVOX [books]) and *Honorary Astronaut* (Ghost Road Press). The first thing that jumped out at me about Pritts' work is that he has a unique voice that can sometimes feel over-the-top but very interesting at the same time. Both books are well worth checking out. (As a former fanboy myself, I can tell you that comic geeks should love *Sensational Spectacular* in particular.)

Here's one of my favorites from *Honorary Astronaut*:

Sunrise, Sunset

Too many birds chirp in the tree
outside your bedroom window or else
it's just one loud squawker doing different voices.
Nothing but rain for the last three days
& the TV says four more until the clouds
break. You can't expect it'll clear up over night:
some things you need to wait out, you say to yourself
as the hours clunk by. Suddenly, orange.
Sunrise, sunset. Suddenly it's a week later
& you're missing even the storms
you've lived through. Some things remain
unchanged. That lonely bird still talks to himself
through the night & if you wanted you could end it
once & for all. Hack limbs from the tree he calls home
until the stripped trunk fools the bird into thinking
it's winter, that he should fly off somewhere warm
& find something else to sing about.

What are you currently up to?

In the happening of this very minute, I'm getting ready to drive east for a reading in Albany, New York. A friend of mine asked me if it was business or fun, and I made the lame joke that my business is fun but that's sort of true. These days my time is divided pretty evenly between about one thousand endeavors and commitments, all of which go to enforce and support the others: I'm writing poems while reading poems while editing poems; the new issue of *H_NGM_N* just came out which means I have a few days to breathe before I start thinking seriously about the next issue and we made the decision to start publishing full-length books so there are logistics there to deal with; my third book,

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The Wonderfull Yeare, is coming out in early 2010 and I'm working with the incredibly nice and sane people at Cooper Dillon Books on proofing/etc.; I'm teaching for, literally, five different schools in one capacity or another; I write letters to friends who send me letters in return and sometimes there are poems or stories or essays to read. I can't complain. It's amazing.

***Sensational Spectacular* seems to be caught in this amazing alternate universe, the one kids would dream up in a secret clubhouse or something. Did this collection begin as separate poems, or did you have a theme going into it?**

The poems in *Sensational Spectacular* were intended to be an interesting side project, something to have fun with while working on the manuscript I was, at the time, calling *Hello Blockhead* but which became *Honorary Astronaut*. I've been alternately vague and coy about this but now seems as good a time as any to come clean; the poems in *Sensational Spectacular* are all ekphrastic in nature. Each poem riffs off and responds to and retells and recasts no less than three but sometimes as many as five images – comic book covers from the Silver Age (roughly the 1960s).

The Flash! Metal Men! Rip Hunter! The Justice League! Metamorpho! The Challengers of the Unknown!

First, the project was a reaction to the fact that there seemed to be an accepted language for poetry, or at least an accepted diction, that I found stifling. In some ways, I was developing a voice in my poems that was coming from the poems I was reading and not coming from me. At the time I was reading a lot of poems that were incredibly reverential and too serious, pious poems that seemed to be simultaneously thrilled with and in awe of their precious ability to turn the quotidian into something messianic. There's a teenage version of me inside me still that calls bullshit on my poems sometimes – why is Nate writing about arias or “a cacophony of larkspur” or, in short, relying on images and experiences that are not his to tell things that are?

I was suddenly struck by a desire to tell a deeper truth, and to push myself to wring that truth from images and scenarios that were true to my life yet overblown, sensationalized, spectacularized, zany, cosmic, and (hopefully) intimately human. The book is made up of several distinct sequences of about five poems each though they're all mixed together now.

I've said this before, as well, but I was deeply unsure of the poems as I was writing them. Jake Adam York (then at *StorySouth*), Bruce Cohen (then as now: *Coconut*) and Matt Hart (with partner-in-crime Eric Appleby at *Forklift, Ohio*) gave me more encouragement than they realized by liking these poems, publishing some of them and implicitly urging me on.

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In *Honorary Astronaut*, there are times when I feel the poems almost go over the top in their enthusiasm, but there's this sense of sincerity that seems to make them work anyway. Or maybe it's the sincerity and confessional nature that make the poems feel so enthusiastic, but it's the tightness of your poems that makes them work. How much time and work do you typically put into the revision process? And are there things you typically try finding?

There's no one answer here. Sometimes, I work my poems hard, running them through several stress tests and changing lots of little things or some big things. Sometimes, I junk the whole thing and start again, but with a few lines still echoing in the far corners of my heart. Since you ask specifically about *Honorary Astronaut*, I'll say that with these poems I was trying to find a balance between an ecstatic utterance that seemed improvisational and a crafted sentence. The thing is, I can talk about the "craft" of these poems - the form - or I can talk about what the poems are about - the ostensible subject, the content - but the primary consideration for me has always been to make the poem a responsive index of my thought. I write what I hope is a fluent, discursive line that is grammatically correct (mostly) and that proceeds by way of association. I'm trying to get the poem to the bone of that.

Practically, though, some of the poems in *Honorary Astronaut* had first been in my MFA thesis (1999?); some popped up in my PhD dissertation (2003). Some, however, were written while the book was in the proof stage! It was my, truly, "first book," though *Sensational Spectacular* was completed, accepted and published a year before it. Those poems were the ones I had lived with and tinkered with obsessively for almost seven years.

Your poems have appeared in many, many publications. Do you have any kind of submission routine you follow?

I have to say that my relationship to this has changed tremendously in the last few years. I didn't have a routine so much as an endless obsession. I remember, 15 years ago, I would sit in a bookstore or library with a copy of *Poet's Market* and make lists of addresses to send my poems to based on nothing so much as liking the name of the journal or where it was published! Then I started to feel my way into the field more and started submitting to journals that published poets I liked or poems of the type I thought I was writing. I want to reiterate that this was really a kind of obsession with me. I did it compulsively. Sometimes, I'd send poems I'd written earlier that day. And when they came back, I'd revise them and send them again later that afternoon.

Eventually I became more focused, as I got more comfortable with my place in the world of poetry. I knew which journals were open to the kinds of things I was doing.

These days, it's very different. I don't feel the same drive to participate in the world of poetry in that manner. As a result, I submit but in a much more organized and sane

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manner. I have a mental list of 10 or 20 journals I think are awesome and would like to be a part of. And I'm finding new awesome ones all the time.

You've published a few collections of poetry now. How do you go about assembling your collections?

I don't know if I have one tried and true method yet. *Sensational Spectacular* was a series, really, and so I knew what went in; in short, I knew it was a book and knew what belonged where. *Honorary Astronaut* went through so many different forms (at one point, it was broken into 4 numbered sections) that I truly don't remember how I put it together. I know I followed themes from one poem to the next. My new book, *The Wonderfull Yeare*, is a shepherd's calendar – so I just put the seasons in order!

I did just put together a new manuscript and I realize I did the same thing that I did at one point with *Honorary Astronaut* and with my chapbook *Shrug*: I printed off all the poems, found a room with big tables and spread them all out. Then I just walked around the room reading them out loud, thinking about the echoes, the correspondences. And at one point, I started picking up a poem, then grabbing another one that belonged before or after the first one. I kept doing this until I was holding all these poems in my hand, and there were others scattered on the floor that hadn't made the cut, and I had a scrap of paper with notes for a few poems that I might need to write to emphasize or add to the manuscript.

As the editor of *H_NGM_N*, an online journal of poetry and prose, what do you look for in poetry submissions?

Gosh, I guess that's hard to define but I know it when I see it. I'm looking for poems that are looking for me. I mean, first, I expect a certain level of competency and professionalism in the submission; *H_NGM_N* has guidelines for a reason. And if anyone wants to know what kinds of poems we publish, the best thing they could do is read the poems in our nine issues, our various chapbooks and side projects.

We get some poems that have no chance; they show no knowledge of the kinds of work we champion, no attention to language or craft, have nothing to really say. Most of what we get is pretty solid, though, and so we have to make some tough calls. I'm looking for something that knocks my head off with its energy and this could come from the compelling nature of the linguistic utterance, it could come from a sparkly and brilliant image, it could come from anywhere. Though we've been labeled as a home for experimental poetry, I'm not happy with that. My models are Renaissance sonneteers, or Coleridge saying "O!" every time he got to see the sunrise. I think a poem is what one beating heart can say to another beating heart in words.

Who (or what) are you currently reading?

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I've been reading Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg lately – I'm enjoying the reckless abandon in their poems and that bold unabashedness is something I admire and work toward. Robert Duncan, again, and Frank O'Hara, again. Barbara Guest. I've been going back to Philip Sidney lately for the force of his love and the force of his language. Also, a book called *The Friendship* about Wordsworth and Coleridge.

If you could pass on only one piece of advice to other poets, what would it be?

Assuming my one piece of advice can only be one word, I'd say "persevere." I think you need to keep at it. I think you need to keep the faith. I think you need to do something that you know is right and keep doing it until everyone else is convinced too.

And I suppose I would encourage poets to realize that writing a poem is a small portion of what they owe to Poetry. A Poet doesn't just write poems. A Poet starts a journal or starts a press. A Poet gives a reading or organizes a reading. A Poet reads poems - thousands of them. A Poet cares about your poem as much as they care about their own.

Great advice! Here are some Nate Pritts-related links:

- [Listen to Nate read from his upcoming collection *The Wonderful Year*.](#)
- [Ghost Road Press](#) (publishers of Honorary Astronaut)
- [BlazeVOX](#) [books] (publishers of Sensational Spectacular)
- [H NGM N](#) (Pritts' online journal)
- www.natepritts.com

Since Nate name-dropped the Poet's Market in the interview, [here's a link to get your very own copy of the 2010 Poet's Market](#) (edited by yours truly). It lists magazines, book and chapbook publishers, conferences, contests, and contains a load of helpful information.

link:

<http://blog.writersdigest.com/poeticasides/2009/12/11/InterviewWithPoetNatePritts.aspx>

*excerpted in **Poet's Market 2011**.*