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Poet Ron Koertge's Absurd Divination

I first found Ron Koertge in Edward Field's *A Geography of American Poets*, which was published in 1979. I fell for the way he loved language, the way he could tell a story in a poem and print a photograph on your memory.

Making Love to Roget's Wife (University of Arkansas Press, 1997) is a collection of his poems, new and selected. This is what poetry should be: outrageous maps of actions that are impossible. Ron Koertge's poems are not pedestrian or pedantic. Woe is not a large part of his poems, although he writes seriously. Humor is one of the names of his game.

I have been penpals with Ron for some time, and this interview was done by letter:

What brought you to poetry writing?

When I was in graduate school at the University of Arizona (1962-5)



Gerry Locklin showed me some poems in a magazine that either was *The Wormwood Review* or was certainly like *The Wormwood Review*. That sort of sassy, dirty, iconoclastic poem really appealed to me compared to the devotional pageantry of graduate school. Because Gerry and a few other guys in the graduate program were writing poetry, I thought I'd try my hand at it, too: poetry buddies instead of golfing buddies. The dominant style

of the little mags in those days was easy going - versus the virtuosic, let's say, and that played right into what I could do, i.e., talk and show off.

There is a sense of humor in your poetry that is often taken to an absurd degree. Were you told as a child that you went too far, and found the page a safe place to retreat with your imagination?

I was told (and am told) that I go too far, which only makes me want



more people to say that louder. I'm not so sure, though, that the page is a retreat; it's more a place to escape the curfew and spend some quality time with what I think of as the Florida of my mind. I know that things in my poems seem absurd - the penis tongs, "*12 Photographs of Yellowstone*" - but they don't seem that absurd to me as I'm writing. I'm not thinking, "Boy, am I zany today!" I just set up a premise and follow it, like those little guys walking great big dogs.

Did you abandon writing fiction for adults at some point, or is the world just not ready for that yet?

Fiction for adults abandoned me right after *The Boogeyman* came out in the early 80's. It's a pretty good grown-up novel, as those things go, but the next two that I wrote were failures. When the Verisimilitude Inspector came around, he just laughed. So I was at one of those low points we all hit when a friend of mine said that I should just forget about being a rich and famous novelist and try my hand at kids' fiction: I could write in first person, and I could be a smarty pants. Who could resist an offer like that?

What writers led you up the ladder to your voice? Who do you admire in the big name game these days?

I like the idea of being led up the ladder to my voice. ("*What's that on the roof? I thought it was a Frisbee, but it's Ron's voice! Will he be happy to see this!*") Seriously, folks, the blame falls on Edward Field. He has always written a bout pop icons and I remember reading his early books with great delight and a sense of liberation: Poetry didn't have to be serious. I didn't have to know classical myths or learn Babylonian. I could write about Tonto or Ozzie Nelson and use the loot of a normal life to finance the art of a normal life. As far as the big name game today, nobody can touch Billy Collins.

What is your training in the realm of the traditional and your thoughts on such?

Nearly all of my poems are free verse. A lot of people find the discipline of meter and/or rhyme inhibiting. My poetry students always say they can't write what they want in traditional forms. For me, though, it's not inhibition, it's difficulty. Using rhyme and meter well -- as someone like Tim Steele does -- is way too hard for me. It's not that I can't say what I want in ye olde forms. It's that I can barely say anything well.

I've never had any formal training in poetry at all. I'm basically self-taught. I've never taken a class in poetry writing or gone to a writer's conference. I've simply read a lot and had a lot of rejection slips. One summer, though, about twenty years ago, I wrote a sonnet a day every day for three months. The rule was that I couldn't do anything else -- go to the track, take in a movie, spend time with my

wife -- until I'd written a creditable sonnet. And I stuck to the rule. Most of the sonnets weren't very good, but at the end of the summer I was a different kind of writer. My lines weren't as lazy, the rhythms were less asperitous, the irony was less obvious, the whole poem was a more interesting instrument of divination.

-- [Ron Koertge interviewed by Amy Halloran](#)

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