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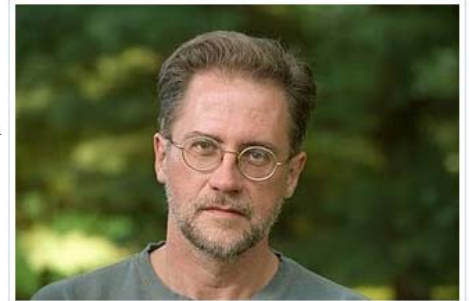
UNLEASH YOUR IMAGINATION AND AWAKEN TO THE JOYS OF LITERATURE AND THE READING LIFE

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THE WRITING LIFE ... John REIMRINGER

A POTENT BREW OF A DÉBUT

JOHN REIMRINGER is a former newspaper editor and a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Arkansas. He lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, with his wife, the poet Katrina Vandenberg. Reimringer has published stories in *Carolina Quarterly*, *Colorado Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, and *Gulf Stream Magazine*. His first novel, *Vestments*, the story of a wayward yet devout young priest who struggles to reconcile his faith with the longings of the flesh, is published by Milkweed Editions on September 1, 2010.



INTERVIEW BY ERIC FORBES

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JAMES PETERS AND JOHN REIMRINGER

Heartiest congratulations on your first novel, *Vestments*. Could you tell me a bit about your family history and yourself? Where were you born? Have you always lived in this part of America?

I was born in Fargo, North Dakota, and grew up in Topeka, Kansas. But my father's family was from St. Paul, and when my wife and I moved here in 2001, I fell in love with it. In many ways, *Vestments* is a love letter to the city of St. Paul. Here's the story behind that:

My great-great-grandfather, Theodor Wiemann, came to the United States from Prussia in 1852, and became a U.S. citizen in St. Paul in 1856, two years after the city was founded. He owned a saloon and grocery downtown. My great-grandfather, Michael Reimringer, married Theodor's daughter Anna in 1880 in Assumption Church, St. Paul's original German-Catholic parish. Family legend has it that Theodor was unhappy about the marriage, which may have been because Michael was French, but also may have been because Michael clerked for Theodor and boarded with the family. We wonder whether there was a little hanky-panky with the boss's daughter.

In any case, in 1887 at the second-ever St. Paul Winter Carnival, Michael Reimringer got drunk, fell off the back of a sleigh, cracked his skull, and died. Theodor and Michael and many of my other relatives are buried about 50 yards downhill from John Ireland, the great Catholic archbishop of St. Paul, and my grandfather, father, and brother were born here.

So my father's family has been a part of St. Paul pretty much as long as it's been a city. That's a long answer, but the novel is intimately about St. Paul and my family.

What's it like to live in America?

That's a hard question. Except for some extended travel in the British Isles and northern Europe, I've never lived anywhere else, so I don't have much basis for comparison. The best I can say is that America is a young country and a young civilization. Like any young person, it has tremendous energy and ideals and enthusiasm, but sometimes it behaves badly. We're still waiting to find out what kind of adult it's going to become. And here the analogy breaks down, because, let's face it, most nations, young or old, often behave like spoiled children.

Was writing something you had always set your heart on?

I started thinking about being a writer at around the age of 10, writing the beginnings to bad sports and science-fiction novels. But I didn't begin systematically working at it until the age of 30. I was the first generation in my immediate family to attend college, and for years I had no idea how one becomes a writer. No one I knew was a writer; no one I knew even knew a writer. I had no models. So I went into journalism instead, working for a couple of small-town newspapers in Kansas. That seemed a practical way to work with words. I later worked as a library clerk. Every job had something to do with books and writing; it all amounted to circling around what I really wanted and working up the knowledge and courage to do it.

What does it mean to be a writer? What do you enjoy most about your life as a writer?

Being a writer means being interested in everything in the world. That's what I enjoy most about the writing life: everything becomes part of the work—anyone you meet, anything you do or read or learn, anyplace you go. I've questioned whether I should've gone into another field, particularly in the hard sciences, but I think it would be hard to focus on one subject, however interesting, for your entire life. That interest in generalism extends to everything I've done—newspaper editing, clerking at a library, teaching.

Was it difficult getting your first novel, *Vestments*, published? Did you experience difficulty in finding an agent or a publisher for it?

Publishing *Vestments* was a years-long process. Except for finding the agent.

Nat Sobel and Judith Weber of Sobel-Weber Associates contacted me after reading my first published short story. They wanted to see a novel. It took me years to deliver *Vestments*, and a couple of years more to finish revising it, and then it didn't sell in New York. I ended up revising it further and selling it to Milkweed myself, but there was a period of real despair. After the book initially didn't sell and Nat and Judith couldn't do any more for it, I remember sitting on our back steps drinking a beer and feeling as if someone had died. I was working as an adjunct English instructor, making very little money, and my life had hit a dead end.

Could you tell me a bit about *Vestments*? What was the seed of the novel? How did you go about creating the characters that people the landscape of your fictional universe? How detailed do you lay out the plot before you began writing the story? Did you know where you were going with the novel as you were writing it or did it evolve on its own? What are some of the themes you dealt with in it? Were you conscious of these when you first set out to write the story? How much research did you do?

My wife, the poet Katrina Vandenberg, loves a quote by Oliver Sacks, who says most literature and mythology is made from the perspective of exile—to start with, exile from paradise. *Vestments* was written from exile in two ways.

First, I grew up devoutly Catholic, but as I got older I drifted to the left and the Church drifted to the right, and so I was writing in exile from the Catholic Church, which I deeply loved as a child, and whose rituals and people I still deeply love. The Catholic Mass is one of the most beautiful rituals on the planet, and the average Catholic, parishioner or priest, is ill-served by the Church's leadership these days. The novel is an elegy for what the Church could be and still occasionally is.

Second, when we moved to St. Paul, I just instantly felt at home and fell in love with this city that turned out to be an ancestral home I hadn't realized I was missing. So it worked out that I got to write from the position of the exile who has returned home, but I had the great advantage of never having lived in my hometown, so it was all fresh to me.

And quick answers to some of the other questions above:



1. Character. Some of my characters are based on people I've known, and some are invented out of whole cloth, but to be successful, every character has to become his or her own person.
2. Plot. I generally know the beginning and have a pretty good idea of the end, it's the arc of the plot—the bridge between those two far shores—that has to be built.
3. Theme. As with character, I start with some ideas, but themes have to develop organically, otherwise the writing ends up being didactic.
4. Research. Yes, I did a lot of research for *Vestments*. Some of it involved just driving around St. Paul, coming to know the city. But I also read histories of St. Paul, and I read a lot about priests, trying to get into their heads. A couple of books on the priesthood that contained a lot of the priests' own words were particularly helpful. I learned that priests have the same problems any of us do with their jobs and their bosses and worrying whether they're spending their lives in the right way and whether they'll have enough money to retire (a real concern for anyone working for the Catholic Church). That really freed me as a writer.

As I was wrapping up the book, I had a retired parish priest who has a law degree and is now a vice president at the University of St. Thomas read the manuscript for accuracy. This guy has a reputation for being very smart and not suffering fools gladly, so naturally I was scared to death when I went into his office to talk about the book. He looked at me across his desk and said: "So, are you an ex-priest?" And I heaved a huge sigh of relief.

As you were writing the novel, how did you know when the manuscript was completed? Do deadlines determine this or do you feel a sense of confidence that there is no way you can improve on the text any further?

I thought it was done, or at least tried to convince myself it was done, any number of times. But I'm glad it didn't sell before the version that Milkweed bought. It was a good book by then, and Daniel Slager, the publisher, asked for a couple of big-picture additions, expanding on themes that were already present. The whole plot was in place when he took the book, but we added 15,000 words during the editing process, and the additional material filled out the story and made it into a very satisfying whole.

What did you learn about yourself in the process of writing your first novel?

I had to grow up along with the narrator. We both had to be mature, competent adults for the book to work. That, unfortunately, took a long time. But in the process, I learned that I had a lot of endurance. I was a long-distance runner in high school and for a number of years after, and writing and selling the novel was a long-distance process that drew on the emotional reserves—the ability to keep putting one foot in front of the other for a long, long time and tolerate a certain amount of pain—that one develops as a runner.

I am always interested in the kinds of books writers read during their formative years. What kinds of books did you read when you were growing up? Were there any books that had a significant impact on you at that early age? Have they in any way contributed to the making of who you are as a writer today?

I read voraciously when I was young, but not necessarily that well. My education as a writer really began in my twenties with picking up a copy of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* while working at High Street Hostel in Edinburgh, Scotland. Some backpacker had left it in the communal bookcase, and from the first sentence—"He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees ..."—I was captivated. I knew I wanted to write like that.

Later, back from Europe and in a not-very-good place in my life, living in an attic and spending a lot of time in bars, I read all of Hemingway one summer, sitting in a bar or on the porch swing of the house where I was renting.

In your opinion, what are the essentials of good fiction? What do you think distinguishes the great novels from the merely good?

Hard to answer. It's like the Supreme Court justice said about pornography: he couldn't define it, but he knew it when he saw it.

What makes a piece of writing last and be worth coming back to? What makes *The Great Gatsby* better than anything else Fitzgerald or almost anybody else has ever written? A great book has to have depth and complexity enough in every aspect from sentences to plot to theme that every time you reread it you find something else surprising, some connection you've never seen or thought of before, something that makes you see the world anew.

In John Cheever's short fiction, the prose is luminous, but if you can find his first book, *The Way Some People Live*—which he did his best to destroy all copies of—well, it's a perfectly competent collection of short stories, but the John Cheever we're familiar with doesn't inhabit it; there's nothing in the prose to set it apart from any other perfectly competent, perfectly forgettable writing. Somehow, in the decade between that and *The Enormous Radio*, Cheever acquired his unforgettable voice. Where'd it come from? Maybe it lies in the willingness of great writers to be utterly themselves on the page. There are excesses in any of the greats that a lesser writer might prune from their prose, but it's those idiosyncrasies that make them who they are. Maybe that's what happened to Cheever: he grew into himself and stopped pruning his own voice.

Tell me a bit about some of the contemporary authors and books you enjoy reading.

Here are a few: Russell Banks's *Affliction*; Junot Díaz's *Drown*; Stuart Dybek's *The Coast of Chicago*; Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*; Richard Ford's *Rock Springs*; Tom Franklin's *Poachers*; Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*; Seth Kantner's *Ordinary Wolves*; Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; anything by Stewart O'Nan; Arthur Phillips's *Prague*. A few writers do priests and Catholic issues especially well: Andre Dubus, Erin McGraw, J.F. Powers, and Richard Russo.

Who are some of your favourite American authors? What are some of your favourite American classics? Why?

I read *Moby-Dick* in its entirety in fifth grade. I'd seen the Gregory Peck movie, and I thought the book would be exactly the same as the movie and it would be an adventure novel. I was utterly lost in the metaphysics, but I kept reading, doggedly waiting for the action to start, and when the Pequod sank at the end and Tashtego nailed the seabird to the mast, I was puzzled. What had happened to the movie? I'm telling you, when you're ten, Melville's description of the whaler's chapel takes forever to read.

Could you suggest a couple of good reads that you think haven't received as much attention as they should?

Sheila O'Connor's *Where No Gods Came*, about a Catholic girl coming of age and dealing with an insane mother in Minneapolis, and Thomas Maltman's *The Night Birds*, about the 1862 Sioux uprising in southwestern Minnesota. Both of these are among the most satisfying contemporary novels I've read, books worth coming back to.

Do you have an all-time favourite book? Why do you enjoy reading it? Do you reread books you enjoy the first time round?

Hemingway's *In Our Time*, his first short-story collection, and really his best book. It looks as simple and clear as a northern lake in the summer, and once you break the surface it unfolds and unfolds. Really one of the great short-story collections ever. Hemingway's prose, especially the early stuff before he started imitating himself, is always a sensual pleasure to read, and the linked short stories and vignettes of *In Our Time* reflect each other in all sorts of interesting ways. As my great teacher Jim Whitehead would've said, it's the one Hemingway wrote for God. And, yes, I reread books constantly.

Do you enjoy reading nonfiction? What kinds?

I love nonfiction. All kinds. War, adventure, memoir, politics, sports, science. Some favorites: *Black Hawk Down*; *Guns, Germs, and Steel*; *House of Good Hope*; *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*; *The Florist's Daughter*; *Seabiscuit*; *The Perfect Storm*; *The Boys of Summer*; *Into Thin Air*; *Young Men and Fire*; *Chickenhawk*; *The Inklings*; *The Beak of the Finch*. Anything that explains a slice of the world clearly.

What are you reading at the moment?

At the start of the summer, I read Blake Bailey's new biography of John Cheever, which was unsparing in brutal detail. Then I reread all of Cheever's short fiction. And I just finished the nonfiction *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. I'm about to settle in with Leif Enger's novels *Peace Like a River* and *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*. Enger is a Minnesota writer who wrote one of the blurbs for *Vestments*. He wrote a damned poem about my novel, so good that it made me like my own book more.

Do you think more creative writing programs are imperative in increasing the number of good writers and/or improve the quality of writing?

That's a delicate one. I wouldn't ever have become a writer without a good MFA program and teachers. But MFA programs have proliferated to the point where they're part of the giant academic pyramid scheme in the liberal arts: we'll give you a graduate degree in return for cheap labor teaching composition, and once you've graduated, you're on your own. There are far more graduates with PhDs and MFAs than there are teaching jobs or publishers.

Students who want to major in writing (or any of the humanities) should be made aware of the mathematics of the job market and publishing, the long odds against success. I was fortunate to have a practical undergraduate degree in journalism, and then go on to a good MFA program. So my advice to potential students would be this: get a practical undergrad degree, or at least double-major in English and something where you can get a job and support yourself and experience something of life outside of college to write about. And if you can't get into a strong MFA program, think hard about whether you can afford to spend a lot of money and time on self-fulfillment.

Do you think there are differences between writing short stories and full-length novels? Which form do you prefer working on?

The short story is a little machine with a certain form and a limited expanse and number of characters. The novel can be anything—it varies much more widely in form and scope. I love the elegance of the short form, but I also really enjoy the opportunity that a novel affords to sit with a situation and a group of characters and really delve into them. Most of my favorite writers—Hemingway, Isaac Babel, Cheever, Flannery O'Connor, John McGahern, Andre Dubus—were at their best in the short story. But I think of myself much more as a novelist, probably because I just spent a decade writing one.

Do you have a favourite short story or short-story collection?

Any number of them. Hemingway's *In Our Time*, Cheever's *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill*. All of Isaac Babel, John McGahern, Flannery O'Connor, J.F. Powers, and Andre Dubus. James Joyce's *Dubliners*. Chekhov. And any number of short-story collections by contemporary writers. There's something unutterably sweet about a writer's first book. It's the one we write on faith, not knowing whether it will ever exist between covers or whether anyone will ever read it. After the first book, we're writing for agents and editors and the audience of our earlier works. But the first one's for God, in the largest sense of that word.

For better or worse, we are now in the age of the e-book. What are your thoughts on the future of books, particularly on e-books and e-book readers? Do you think they will replace physical books one day? Can you think of any fallouts relating to e-books that might impinge on professional writers in the near future?

First, I'm looking at e-books optimistically. They're another avenue through which to get literature into the

world. They're also a tremendous money-saver for publishers so far as getting the galleys of a book into the hands of reviewers, librarians, and bookstore owners.

That said, I hope the book will always exist as a physical object. There's something satisfying about having a book in your hands that doesn't exist in electrons. Plus, we're becoming aware that our minds work differently when reading on paper as opposed to online. Reading a physical book grounds you in the physical world, slows your mind down, allows you to access a deeper, slower form of thought. When my life's going right, and I'm able to stay off the internet and be with books or working on the house or in the garden, I can feel my brain slow down and my deep focus return.

It is said that literary novels often lack plots. Do you think literary novelists should put more emphasis on plot and less on stylistics? Why do you think there's a perceived divide between popular and literary fiction?

I think a good literary novel should have both style and plot. I want my writing to have both. Part of that is a political decision: given my education and upbringing, a lot of literature was inaccessible to me as a young adult. It took Hemingway, who could hit from both sides of the plate when it came to style and plot, to open the door to becoming a writer for me. I want people who come from an education and background similar to mine—people who haven't necessarily had high-priced educations or grown up in houses where the parents had graduate or even college degrees—to be able to read and enjoy my writing. I want to leave that door open.

posted by Eric Forbes at 10:42 PM