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## Interview with Kimberly Johnson

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## INTERVIEW WITH KIMBERLY JOHNSON

Kimberly Johnson is a poet, translator, and literary critic. Her collections of poetry include *Leviathan with a Hook*, *A Metaphorical God*, and the forthcoming *Uncommon Prayer*. Her monograph on the poetic developments of post-Reformation poetry was published in 2014. In 2009, Penguin Classics published her translation of Virgil's *Georgics*.

Her poetry, translations, and scholarly essays have appeared widely in publications including *The New Yorker*, *Slate*, *The Iowa Review*, *Milton Quarterly*, and *Modern Philology*.

Recipient of grants and fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Utah Arts Council, and the Mellon Foundation, Johnson holds an M.A. from the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars, an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Literature from the University of California at Berkeley.

Kimberly Johnson lives in Salt Lake City, Utah.

**INSCAPE:** The third section of your book, *Uncommon Prayer*, relies on different organization than the previous two sections. Recognizing your use of prose poetry and the military alphabet, what factors did organization play while you were composing this last section of your book?

**KIMBERLY JOHNSON:** I was experimenting in terms of organization. Poetry is a mode of writing that relies on organization of

some kind, but I wanted to figure out what principles or strategies I could bring when there is no organization built into the language while dispensing with the use of lines, rhyme, and meter. I used the military alphabet as a way to translate something ordinary, the alphabet, into something that has denotative and connotative meaning. For example, an M is also Mike. J happened to be Juliet. This language is shouting to be played with. I was trying to impose structural organization onto chaos.

**INSCAPE:** You co-edited the anthology *Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry*, which traces the history of devotional poetry in its historical traditions of religion. How does the poetic practice, the process of creating poetry, influence the spiritual practice?

**KIMBERLY JOHNSON:** Poetry and spirituality have been fused together for thousands of years. Some of the earliest poems we have are hymns and prayers and some of the earliest rituals we have are experienced through poetry. There is a close relationship. Lyric is utterance with no expectation of a response. It speaks itself out into the world; nobody talks back, nor does it expect a response. This is just like prayer. The auditor remains inaccessible, inapprehensible. Poetry and religious practice have natural affinities because their strategies of communication end up being identical in the way they constitute speech and desire.

**INSCAPE:** You have often been identified as a devotional, religious, and metaphysical poet. Do you pay attention to these terms?

Do you find them limiting?

**KIMBERLY JOHNSON:** It is certainly true that I am interested in the history of the devotional lyric, as a scholar and poet, but I am more interested in language. The most urgent crisis that I experience is the fact that words don't *mean*. Our experience exceeds any representation of it. I'm very interested in how poetic language tries to compensate for that lack. This isn't so much a theological issue as it is a representational issue; however, the term that has become the preeminent metaphor for the unknowable in Western culture is God. It's a ready-made metaphor for me to return to over and over again when I am dealing with questions of meaning, meaninglessness, or the disconnect between how we experience the world and how we put things into language.

**INSCAPE:** At the risk of this being a selfish question, what advice would you give to a twenty year old poet?

**KIMBERLY JOHNSON:** Read everything. Read in the shower, read magazines, read the back of your cereal box, read crappy novels, read science journals. You never know what might be interesting to you. Poetry is about language and you have to be sucking it in all the time in order for it to strike your ear. Your goal is to have a perpetually defamiliarized relationship with language. You never want to be so comfortable that you start to not see what the words are doing. You want to feel the texture of each word. You can only do that if you're exposing yourself constantly to different modes of language. The best way to make language seem strange is to learn

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a different one. Each word becomes a choice, and that's exactly where you want to be as a poet.