



10-2009

Interview with Kevin Hart

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape>

Recommended Citation

(2009) "Interview with Kevin Hart," *Inscape*: Vol. 29 : No. 2 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol29/iss2/17>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inscape* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Kevin Hart Interview

INSCAPE: What drew you to writing religious verse?

KEVIN HART: Well, I was drawn originally to write poetry, not religious verse as such. I started writing poems when I was about 13 years old, after being introduced to Percy Shelley and memorizing "Ozymandias" and then several other poems by several other poets. Poetry is probably religious in a sense that it touches a layer of mystery and the ineffable, rather than being thematic. There are very few poems which are devotional verse, but almost all of it is religious in the sense that it is concerned with the exploration of mystery. God comes to us, I think, in all sorts of ways, not simply through the sacraments and not simply through church services, not simply through incense and candles, in my tradition. But God comes to us in nature, in conversations, in reading, in all sorts of things. So, the poetry you'd call religious is not a particular cut, a particular section of poetry, but is a quality, a dimension, which goes through all very great poetry.

INSCAPE: Would you say that's a quality in all of great literature?

KH: Not in all great literature. Poetry and literature, I think, are two different things. Poetry is the older, more noble part of literature. We call the novel the “novel” for very good reasons. It’s fairly recent in European history and probably has had its day. You know the joke about the novel: Proust shot a man, Joyce put him in the coffin, and Beckett hammered in the nails. That was the end of the novel. The novel still continues. People write novels today, of course, and some of them are very fine, but as an art form it probably exhausted itself very quickly in two or three hundred years, whereas poetry has yet to exhaust itself in any way. There still are astonishingly new things that you can do in poetry that you don’t seem to be able to do in narrative fiction.

INSCAPE: What aspect do you see in poetry that lends itself to this quality of the religious, as opposed to other forms of writing?

KH: Poetry has the ability to lead one into the unknown, the ineffable, the darkness or the light, depending on how you think of it. Poetry is ultimately to do with a movement of experience in the original sense of the word, namely an exposure to peril, to danger. When one writes a poem one is exposed to something you don’t know about yourself, something you may not want to know about yourself, some layer of the self you don’t normally have contact in, or a relationship between yourself and other human beings, or your relationship between yourself and God that you’re not in control of, and going into that relationship and bringing something back in words can of

ten be very surprising for the poet. It can expand the self. It expands the amount, the intensity of life that one has. And it also, in very great poems, can bring a certain kind of mystery into the poem, which is not obscure. There's a very dominant view in English literature that profundity and obscurity are the same thing. It comes ultimately from Edmund Burke. I think, on the contrary, that the greatest mysteries are those which have a certain clarity to them. You're not going into complete darkness, but the clarity contains its own mysteries. And that probably marks my poetry all the way through.

INSCAPE: Could you mention your work process? Do you have a time when you sit down and say, "Now I'm working on writing?" Is that on a weekly basis, a daily basis?

KH: Perpetual. I have this little notebook that I carry around everywhere and have by my bedside table. As you can see, I write down things that come. Sometimes they're images, sometimes they're a design for stanza. Every few nights, once the children are watching television and not going to disturb me—I must be in a state where in my room I'm not going to be disturbed—then I go through my notebooks, and I sometimes have this sense that something might come. Very hard to tell. I mean, it's not as though it's regular and identifiable that I get the sense that I should try to see if something is there, and often it can be stimulated by going over my notes. So usually for me I compose in the evenings, print out two or three versions if I have time, take them with me the next day to work along with the

poem I've sent to myself as email and then go over it the next few days. So I live with it until it's completely done. I try to read over it in different moods, different times of the day, and see if it can sway me to its own life, rather than it being swayed to my own life. If it can snap me out of a mood, like if I come out of a meeting at work with my dean, then that's a very good sign if I read the poem that I'm working on, if the poem can take me completely away from being cross with the dean into its world, then it probably is getting close to being finished.

INSCAPE: What challenges does the poet face today? Are there unique challenges writing in the 21st century as opposed to challenges that Shelley would have faced?

KH: The biggest challenge, I suppose, is indifference of readers. Increasingly, young Americans are not brought up with poetry as something that should be a pleasure and a great love. They are brought up to think of poetry as difficult, arcane, for only a special group of people to show how clever they are in reading it. This is a tremendous pity; it's an impoverishment of the American imagination. There are many different sorts of poetry, and some of them are difficult. Some of them are arcane, but many aren't. And also, there is nothing wrong in living with a poem over a long period of life, poems that you learn by heart when you're 10, 11, 12, 15, and you grow up with them.

I often have said to my students, with our undergraduate students—I do make them learn poems whenever I teach

poetry—I say, you're going to remember this and enjoy it because all of you sometime sooner or later will have children, and you're going to have the experience which I've had: You're woken up by your baby at two in the morning, you're dog tired, and you have to get this angry baby to sleep, right? The very best way of doing it is to recite a poem to the baby. It calms you down. It slows down your breath. It slows down your blood. The rhythms of the poem have an extraordinary effect upon the child, and the child will go back to sleep. You can do that only if you have the poems deeply by heart. And over the years I've had many students who of course have become mothers and fathers and have had this experience, and they say that the five or six poems they learnt by heart with me, they've used over and over again, and they talk about which poems work better than others. So there is something practical in poems as well.

INSCAPE: That's really beautiful. I wanted to ask you too—this is something I ask writers lately—how do you feel about print culture? Do you think we're ever going to lose print completely? Is that something you think about? Or do you think that's even an issue?

KH: I think generally we're in a huge transition, that a lot of things which are in print won't go into print. I know this simply from being a professor, thinking of faculty who are trying to get tenure and publish books. It's becoming harder and harder. Poetry, however, will always be in print, because it is

niche. You can buy books of poetry that are slim. You can take them everywhere, and people want the experience of sitting down in an armchair, relaxing in the evening with a book of poetry where you meditate on it. You're not there to turn the pages quickly. You're there to read and reread and for it to have a spiritual influence upon you, ideally. So I think that's always going to be the case. It may not be so with nonfiction. Maybe it's going to be easier in the long run to have some version of a Kindle for that. I don't have a Kindle. But I can just tell that when I travel, rather than have lots and lots of books with me, in the end it's going to be better to have something like a Kindle where I can read books of philosophy and theology—but not for poetry. I'm not going to read poems on a Kindle. It's much harder.