Interviews

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INTERVIEWS

*Inscape* Staff and Featured Authors

Every Friday afternoon in the Harold B. Lee Library, writers from all over the country come and share their work with BYU students. The following is a collection of writerly wisdom and insight shared by the authors with the editors of *Inscape*.

*Where the Muse Hides*

**John Bennion**

[Inspiration comes] from my head. I write mostly about introspective or meditative people, like me. I watch plays and read books and get ideas from them.

**Melanie Rae Thon**

I am inspired by so many things: art, dance, music, swallows, clouds, wolves, mountains, my
brother washing the wounds on my father’s feet, ants carrying pink petals. The whole world offers itself to us; the sources of inspiration are endless.

[Research] is an essential part of the process. I never know what I’ll discover. . . . I can’t write about a child with cancer unless I learn about his suffering, the progression of the disease, the side effects of chemo and radiation. I can’t render his sister’s grief unless I explore what it would mean to give someone I love my own marrow—and then watch him die, and believe I had failed. . . . For me, research is a path, a way to deepen compassion and awaken the senses. My hope is that this awareness will change the way I live in the world.

CASSIE KELLER COLE

Inspiration is difficult to quantify, if it is even possible. To me the idea of “more” inspiration is how much a person is willing to stretch him/herself. Inspiration is a matter of being aware, curious, interested, and eager to learn. Inspiration, I find, is received from practice. If I hadn’t been a writer while I was single, I doubt I would have transformed into a writer when I married [my husband].

BRIAN DOYLE

This is one of the great lessons of life, I think, ’cause whatever you think you’re sure of,
you’re wrong. You’re young, but when you get older you realize that all the things that you were absolutely sure of were wrong—you’re an idiot. You know, be open. And the essay is open to all kinds of oddness. Like, I wrote a book about a year in a vineyard and I got really absorbed by the animals. It all began with one question. I asked this one guy, “Tell me about the natural history of the vineyard.” Animals and birds and plants and insects and fungi and all. Off he goes. So I got really absorbed by it. There’s a whole chunk of the book devoted to the animals.

I asked a guy who was about to die, “What mattered in your life?” And he began to answer me in the most subtle and amazing ways: folding laundry hot from the dryer, cobblers and tailors, the way horses smelled in spring, postcards on which people have written so much that they can barely squeeze in the signature. The tiniest things. This ends up just being a list, but to me it’s an essay.

Genre Appeal

Doug Thayer

I think writing a short story or fiction is much more challenging for me than memoir. It just flowed. I wrote that [Hooligan] in six months.
There’s no plot; there’s a tone. But that’s automatic. I happened to be kind of ironic, that wasn’t hard. . . . Point of view is a little different because it’s a memoir of a group of boys. So its narrative voice is often first person plural rather than first person singular. And I was very interested in the whole idea of time and place.

**Cassie Keller Cole**

Until recently, I have always considered myself a poet. Now I’m satisfied being a writer.

I have shelves of journals and notebooks, shelves of loose leaf paper and someday my house will probably burn because of their brittle sentimentality—but I keep them because they remind me to continue writing. My first journal was dictated to my mom because I didn’t know the alphabet completely. My parents have scraps of my “stories” that are just scribbles. Writing has always been an essential part of me; it is part of being alive for me, like worship, hope, water, prayer.

**Scott Hatch**

I cross-pollinate from a lot of genres. Of course, I think creative nonfiction, to me, is essential to the poem because of the way it captures dramatic art, which you also get in fiction, but also it captures the immediate personal experience
in ways very similar to the way the lyrical poem and
the narrative poem captures those things. So a lot of
what I steal from is fiction and creative nonfiction.

**BRIAN DOYLE**

A lot of what you’re digging into now, especially as editors, is “what’s the form?” Who cares? The one distinction that you make is “is it true or not?”

And you can play with truth.

Often, an essay is improved by leaving things out. Age teaches you nothing, but experience teaches you sometimes what not to write. A great essay sometimes has holes in it for the reader to jump across—one of the beauties of the mosaic essay. One of the pieces in *Inscape* was a mosaic essay. Birth: blah, blah, blah, Cherries: blah, blah, blah. You know what I mean? But that kind of thing is fun because how many of those pieces fit together? Ideally, if it’s really well done, then the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It has an extra resonance. Journalism doesn’t have that, but essays do.

**KIMBERLY HEUSTON**

Katherine Paterson said once that she writes historical fiction because it helps establish the plot-line, and I would have to agree. I like hav-
ing pre-existing characters, settings, and events to help me imagine my way into another way of being. And I think the ridiculous amount of research that I do pays off in another way, as well. I hope that the problems that my characters face and the strategies they use to solve them are, by and large, appropriate to the time and place in which they find themselves.

**The Writing Process**

**Cassie Keller Cole**

Much of the "process" is the motion of the pen on the page, the words on the screen, the daily commitment to writing. Once I fill a notebook I search through it to see if there is anything worth expanding, and if there are strands of sentences or images, I play around with them until they become meaningful or are worn out. Often I have an idea of what I want to write, I research, clarify in my mind, write. Then I go back and back to edit. I read it out loud about eight hundred times. Then I edit again.

**John Bennion**

Mostly the change in my novel was cutting it back. I had to cut it by 40 percent after it was accepted.
Kimberly Heuston

I was unpacking some boxes in the garage after a move and came across an old notebook and sat down and wrote a poem, the burden of which was that I thought I had a good poem in me somewhere, but it showed absolutely no signs of emerging anytime soon. It was another ten years before I began to write seriously. It would be surprising if my books did not in some way reflect the fact that their author has lived a rich—or at least complicated—life. . . . Every artist has to serve an apprenticeship of one kind or another. It just so happened that my junk miles were spent editing other people’s writing instead of my own.

Christine Allen-Yazzie

The best way to learn to write is to read a lot and to read broadly. When you read, you pick up a lot of information unconsciously; you learn about pacing, narrative possibilities, different kinds of voices.

Revise your work, but don’t overpolish: the world has rough edges and imperfections, and the readers need to experience that to feel convinced of the story.
Poets on Poetry

Daniel Rzicznek

Never call yourself a poet. Let someone else label you that. Because otherwise it’s like, “I will be a poet!” It’s a little pretentious and you gotta earn the name.

To get poetry back to the masses and back to students and sort of beyond, we have to demystify this whole idea that you need a degree to understand contemporary poetry. It’s just as enjoyable as a piece of art hanging on a wall or a short story you’ve read or an essayist you appreciate. I think it’s more of a mindset and demystifying the whole poetry as an academic pursuit. And really it’s never been like that for me. I did a Masters to study with a specific person and the Masters doesn’t entitle me anything. It doesn’t mean I know more about poetry than anyone, than either of you here or any random person on the street.

Scott Hatch

Poetry is the lyrical language in which narrative shape is executed.

Mary Hedengren

It’s easier to admit that you go to Star Trek conventions than let average people know you
write poetry—because there is a lot of bad poetry out there. It’s so “easy” to write poetry that everyone does it and so “difficult” to read that no one does that. I, too, you know, used to slog through submissions at *Inscape*. There is no incentive to write poetry. You don’t get boys doing it (although some boys claim they can get girls with poetry); you don’t make money with it; it doesn’t make you popular—even if you’re top of your game there will probably be only a handful of people who care about what you’re writing and many of them with be interested only because, frankly, they wish they were at the top instead of you. I don’t know this because I’m at the top—I know this because I’ve felt this way about those up there.

So why do I do it? I like words and I like images and I like poetry. I like the neat little bundles that I can tie things all up in and those little bundles are so portable. I can carry a poem around in my head a lot easier than a personal essay or a novel. Sometimes those ideas end up back in essays or short stories, but usually they fit best in the highly concentrated form of a poem. In the end, that’s why I write poetry: it’s a surprisingly efficient way to figure out the world.

**Dixie Partridge**

I seldom make a conscious effort to bring religious beliefs into my poetry. . . . I believe spiri-
tual things are a natural part of life, and I think that they are strongly at the root of some of my writing. Subtlety in such things has worked more effectively for me.

Words of Advice

JOHN BENNION

Write a certain number of hours a day and read everything in your genre. Plenty of people think of themselves as writers but they don’t have regular habits of writing and reading.

BRIAN DOYLE

You just start. That’s the thing I really want to say, to young people especially. Never sit down to write an essay. Never sit down to write literature. Never sit down being sure of what you’re writing, just sit down to tell a story. Sit down and start. Ninety-nine percent of it is getting your butt in the chair, and then you just sort of play. See what happens. Write it down and then, you know, if one thing leads to another, maybe there’s an essay growing there. Or, if it’s short . . . sometimes it just is what it is. It’s a little thing; it’s a proem.

CHRISTINE ALLEN-YAZZIE

Good writing is all about empathy. . . . [François Camoin] taught me that my artistic choices
didn’t have to revolve around plot. He helped me reverse a bad habit toward sentimentality, symbolism, and psychoanalysis in fiction—all of which mean to simplify and categorize people.

**DOUG THAYER**

The students in high school have read poetry, fiction, and plays. They haven’t read essays, they don’t know how to read argument or exposition. And so I try to teach them a technique of how to read it. They just don’t know how to approach an essay. They don’t know how to look for repetition; they don’t know how to look for ideas, that is, for the controlling idea. They don’t know how to move up and down the ladder of abstraction. . . . They don’t know how to think inductively, I mean intentionally. They do it, but they don’t know what they’re doing. Writing is a skill. It’s something you learn how to do. I realize that people have what I call aptitude. I don’t believe much in talent. I’ve had too many “talented” students who aren’t worth much. They just aren’t willing to work hard. . . . Good writing takes a lot of hard work. I think that it means draft after draft after draft. I realize that it’s possible to sit down in one fell swoop and maybe write a good essay or maybe an acceptable short story, but you can’t do it over and over again.
MARY HEDENGREN

[I] recommend attending the reading series at the library and any chance you have to be exposed to new authors and new ideas. Go to devotional. Visit the International Cinema. Be involved. A university is more like an intellectual gym than a high school—it's entirely up to you to take advantage of all of the resources that are available.

DOUG THAYER

I just want my reader to feel, to see, to hear the experience. A good short story is an experience; or a novel. . . . It's just hard to describe things so that the reader feels them, sees them, hears them, touches them. You've got to stay way down on the ladder of abstraction, stay in a concrete sense.

DIXIE PARTRIDGE

Don't leave your beliefs and your culture out of your writing, any more than you would leave out the landscapes and personal experiences from childhood onward. I've looked with interest at some of the great writing that has come out of the Jewish community, and the Catholic. That which is great from such writers includes a good deal of their culture and belief, but the writing
and presentation skills are what make it great, not the culture or beliefs by themselves. The skills, commitment, and developed, focused talent are what builds the fine literature out of the culture or background in which it is rooted.