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Dan Tobin Delves into his Poetry

Dan Tobin sits at his desk, amid his books, which are piled high upon it -- with some space for writing. Behind him, *Starry Night* watches over the Emerson professor's two bookshelves, sporting volumes, bound of every color of the rainbow.

When it comes to what makes writing work for Tobin, who has brown hair and glasses, and wears a black vest with medium-wash jeans, drawing the reader in is paramount.

According to Tobin, Chair of Writing Literature and Publishing at Emerson College, and author of four poetry books, "John Gardner said that a good piece of fiction draws the reader into a continuous fictional dream, a completely believable alternate reality. A poem that "works" accomplishes the same, though perhaps in a somewhat more multivalent way, since poems by the simple fact of being written in lines establish a vertical dimension to the writing. That means a poem needs to satisfy musically and formally, in a way that is not as urgently required of prose."

On November 22, 2008 at 7 p.m, Tobin will give a poetry reading at The Somerville News Writers' Festival VI at 371 Summer Street in Davis Square.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Tobin's mother worked as a bank clerk, and his father on the docks in New York.

Never having been encouraged to write by his parents, the teenager started writing poetry in a notebook, with topics, about which Tobin currently writes, ranging from History to Mythology to love poems --- "like every adolescent," says Tobin. "I liked playing with the sounds of language."

"They [Tobin's parents] were not particularly inclined to poetry. So, there wasn't a particularly educational foothold in the house," says Tobin, with a laugh. "They didn't have any background, in the area that I grew

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inclined to pursue, myself.”

However, “[My parents] didn’t discourage me either. They pretty much went with what I wanted to do,” Tobin continues.

The poet earned his higher education at the following institutions: “B.A., Iona College; M.T.S., Harvard University; M.F.A., Warren Wilson College; Ph.D., University of Virginia.”

Where did Tobin snatch his first job? He was a Term Faculty Member at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

For Tobin, the writing process fluctuates. “I try to draft a poem as quickly as possible, with as great intensity as I can. Then, I just keep going back and going back,” says Tobin. “Others, go through many drafts to get where they’re going.”

The length of time Tobin requires for the composition of each poem varies considerably. “I will come back to a poem after years and revise it again. I’ve had poems that went through a minimal number of drafts and I was satisfied with them,” says Tobin. “Usually, things have to go through quite a number of drafts, and who knows how many hours of me mulling.”

In case Tobin feels stuck at any given time, he simply directs his attention to another poem-in-progress --- for he has a list of topics --- with any of which he could begin to tinker.

However, “I try to work on things as well as I can, even when I don’t feel inclined to make a poem,” says Tobin.

According to Tobin, it is always difficult for him to simply begin scribbling away, with his pen, on a new masterpiece. Of course, the poet wishes beginning the writing process came more effortlessly to him.

Tobin prefers to write in a standard-size, bound notebook in his study at home or his office at Emerson. When the opportunity arises, he enjoys writing in mid-morning, and continuing for a large chunk of the day.

“I’ve written just about anywhere. I have also jotted ideas or lines down,

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on the "T", coming into work and going back from work," says Tobin. "If I have to write on a napkin, or a piece of tissue, I'll do that, too," he says, with a hearty laugh.

Obviously, finding a poem's tone and voice is not an instant wave of a wand. Instead, "A poem really doesn't find its proper voice until it finds the proper cadence of its lines. And that's a matter of discovery and revision and reworking," says Tobin.

A poem must grab a reader from the first line. Conversely, "An ending, in a way, has to choose you," Tobin says, with a laugh. "It needs to evolve from the experience of writing the poem. Good endings don't close the poem down."

Tobin has composed countless Free Verse poems "I don't see myself in any particular camp, or any particular school," he says.

"I did write one short story in my life, which I have thrown away," says Tobin. However, he enjoys writing critical and personal essays.

Surprisingly, "at one point, I did feel like I had to make a choice between poetry and visual art. I wanted to draw and paint, for a long time, but I didn't think I could do both," says Tobin. Currently, Tobin is still interested in both poetry and painting.

After Tobin believes that enough poems have been compiled, he "just spread[s] them all out on the floor. Gradually, I try to find the shape of the thing."

Besides writing, Tobin reveals his other interests. "I'm interested, recently, in Physics. I continue to be interested in history, and music...and baseball," says Tobin, with enthusiasm.

Poetry brings Tobin much joy "The most rewarding part is probably eventually producing a piece that you believe in and are satisfied with," says Tobin.

To date, Tobin has four published books of poems, which are entitled, *Where the World is Made* (1999), *Double Life* (2004), *The Narrows* (2005) and *Second Things* (Four Way Books, 2008). His fifth book of poetry, *Belated*

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Heavens, will hit the shelves in 2010.

Tobin advises writers who are just starting out to, "Read, read, read. Read everything and read deeply. The most important thing is to find those poets to whom you have a seemingly innate connection."

Tobin looks to the future with the intent to continue writing poetry. "I would like to be like Yates, in the sense that Yeats kept writing, pretty much until the day he died."

Note: This essay originally appeared in The Somerville News