

Carol Smallwood interviews Theresa Rodriguez

*Sonnets*

Theresa Rodriguez

Bardsinger Books, 2019, 43 pages, kindle;  
\$2.99 purchase



**Smallwood: Your latest collection, *Sonnets* covers many topics among the 37 poems including the sonnet itself. Evan Mantyk, President, Society of Classical Poets, praises your work: “In fourteen lines, her sonnets are able to communicate what takes essayists and writers thousands of words.” How and when did you begin writing in this challenging form?**

I believe I started writing sonnets in my early 20's. I was taught something about sonnets (but not much in the way of other poetic forms) in high school and I began experimenting and found it immensely satisfying. I was using what I knew. Since then I have experimented with other poetic forms and have made up some forms of my own. As I mention in “Form Sonnet” and “Spenserian Sonnet,” I enjoy the “stricture” and “structure” in writing formal poetry, the “puzzle-solving different mental way.” It is a lot like a complex and beautiful puzzle to me. Sonnets are like a distillation of thought—can you say what you have to say in only fourteen lines?

**Smallwood: Besides the sonnet itself, what other topics do your sonnets cover?**

I span a real gamut of concepts and emotional states in *Sonnets*. There are sonnets about love, longing, loss; death and life; religious hypocrisy and crises of faith; issues regarding mental illness; the creative process; healing and redemption. I have a sonnet about JonBenet Ramsey, the little beauty pageant girl who was found dead in her own home; I have a sonnet dedicated to Saint John of the Cross, who wrote *The Dark Night of the Soul*; two sonnets for Shakespeare; a sonnet about “birthing” poetry much like one labors in childbirth. It is an interesting mix!

**Smallwood: There are different types of sonnets. Please tell readers about them, the type you use and what is the most challenging part in composing in the sonnet form:**

Not being an academic, I can tell you from the perspective of a craftsman. The three main forms are the Petrarchan, the Shakespearean, and the Spenserian. All forms of sonnets are fourteen lines. Each has its own rhyme scheme but they all share iambic pentameter in common. All are supposed to have a *volta* or “turn,” a point where contrasting ideas or sentiments are juxtaposed, a turn of thought or argument. In actuality I have written many sonnets with no *volta* at all, at least not consciously. In the Petrarchan sonnet the *volta* occurs at the beginning of line 9; in Shakespearean and Spenserian it can occur at line 9 or at the final couplet (line 13). The rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan is *abbaabba cdcdcd* or *abbaabba cd-*

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*ecde*; in the Shakespearean it is *abab cdcd efef gg*; in the Spenserian it is *abab bcbc cdcd ee*.

I mainly write in the Shakespearean sonnet form but I have experimented with the Spenserian and it is a truly challenging and rewarding undertaking. I have also created a few of my own that do not strictly follow either of these forms.

The most challenging part of composing in the sonnet form for me is to keep the rhymes from sounding hackneyed. There are certain groups of words that lend themselves to rhyme (groups like *true, due, you, or see, be, free*, for example) and others which might be more difficult (such as *rules, jewels, fools*). Because many of these words are easy to rhyme (and probably even more so when they are not) I usually find myself writing a little list on the side of the paper with rhymes that might work. Then I try to fit them into what might make sense with what I am trying to say. I just don't want it to sound like something that has been said or heard before. Even if the words I am rhyming are commonly used rhyming words I want it to sound like it has been rhymed by me for the first time.

### **Smallwood: Do you also write free verse poetry?**

Indeed I do! Some of my most poignant and psychologically complex poems have been in free verse. I do tend to default to some kind of formal scheme for writing most of the time, however.

### **Smallwood: Do you see a connection being a voice teacher and singer with being a poet?**

My desire as an artist, be it with words or with music, is to create beauty and to reflect truth with a distinctive voice. In teaching voice I have striven to help singers to first create the most beautiful sounds they can and then to express truth through those sounds. As a singer myself I have striven to create beauty within my instrument and make a distinctive statement. As a poet I am striving to express truth first, and beauty comes from this. So I suppose the process is switched a bit between the two disciplines.

### **Smallwood: Are you working on another poetry collection?**

I am mulling the idea of a collection called *Just Christian*, which would contain poems purely of a "religious" or devotional nature. I also had an idea for a collection called *Other Things Entering In*, which is based on the scripture in Mark 4:19, where spiritual unfruitfulness is derived from many impediments, including the "lusts of other things entering in."

### **Smallwood: What advice would you give someone interested in writing sonnets?**

The first step would be to read sonnets. I recommend reading them aloud, to hear the music in the metrical and rhyming structure. It will also help the poet to hear how his or her own voice will sound within the sonnet form. There are websites, including the Society of Classical Poets, that offer articles on how to write sonnets.

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**Smallwood: Please tell readers about the important nonfiction books you've written:**

My first book of poetry is entitled *Jesus and Eros: Sonnets, Poems and Songs*. Many of the sonnets in *Jesus and Eros* are found in *Sonnets*. Besides mostly formal poetry I do have some free verse as well in the Poems section. I also have what are song lyrics to various songs I have written, so they read like lyrics.

I wrote a book entitled *When Adoption Fails* which tells the painful story of my being raised in an abusive adoptive home. I wrote a book entitled *Warning Signs of Abuse: Get Out Early and Stay Free Forever* as a guide for women seeking to get out of abusive relationships. And I wrote a eco-friendly parenting book entitled *Diaper Changes: The Complete Diapering Book and Resource Guide*.

**Smallwood: Do you have a website?**

My website is [www.bardsinger.com](http://www.bardsinger.com). You can see and hear me reading my poetry under the "Poet" tab.

Readers can enjoy some of the classical poetry of Theresa Rodriguez on:

<https://classicalpoets.org/?s=theresa+rodriguez>

Carol Smallwood is a literary reader, judge, and interviewer. A recent poetry collection is *Patterns: Moments in Time* (WordTech Communications, 2019).