

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

Carol Smallwood Interviews

James A. Cox, Editor-in-Chief, Midwest Book Review

<http://www.midwestbookreview.com/index.html>



The highly popular and comprehensive Midwest Book Review since 1976 hosts 9 monthly book review magazines such as the Reviewer's Bookwatch and Internet Bookwatch which are written by volunteer reviewers while the other magazines are by Midwest Book Review and associates.

Smallwood: How did you become the Editor-in-Chief of The Midwest Book Review physically located in Wisconsin?

Jim Cox: In the summer of 1976 I was sitting in a Wednesday night meeting of the Madison Science Fiction Club in a State Street restaurant. The purpose of our weekly get-togethers was to socialize with like minded folk for whom fantasy and science fiction were something more than just another hobby.

Into that night's gathering came a good friend of mine by the name of Hank Luttrell. Hank was a mail order book dealer specializing in comics, mysteries, and science fiction—and whose ambition was to create his own bookstore (which he subsequently did and it's still in business here in Madison Wisconsin as 20th Century Books).

Hank came in with a copy of an expensive coffee-table sized book called "The Toynebee-Ikeda Dialogue". It was a compilation of correspondences over the years between the late British historian Arnold J. Toynebee and the Japanese philosophy/educator Isadeu Ikeda.

Hank knew that I was a history buff and well versed in the writings of Toynebee. He said to me: "How would you like to have this book for free?" I said to him: "Whose kneecaps do you want me to break?"

It turned out that all I had to do was read the book and then on Saturday go down to a new radio station that had just opened up in Madison a few weeks earlier. It was WORT-FM—a non-commercial, counter-culture, community supported radio station of the leftish persuasion.

I was to go on a talk show with a fellow named John Ohliger and take 3 minutes to tell him (and his audience) what I thought of the book—and then I could keep it for myself!

I said to Hank: "Hand me the book and tell me where this radio thing is located."

The following Saturday morning I went down to the ugliest one-story cinder block building I had ever seen. I was introduced to this older gent who was some kind of liberal University of Wisconsin college professor. After John Ohliger made his introductory remarks I commenced to tell him (and his audience) about Toynebee, Ikeda, and this book of theirs.

I was still going strong when John reached over and gently tapped me

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

on the arm and said he had to wrap things up, his 30 minute program was over. While John was signing off I sat there mentally upbraiding myself for the motor-mouth I had been and prepared to apologize profusely for hogging his whole show.

John had a stack of books by his elbow. After we were off the air and before I could launch into my abject grovel—he pushed that stack of books across the table to me and asked if I could look through these books and come back next week.

Thus my career as a book reviewer was born!

Three months later I was hosting that show (The Madison Review of Books) myself. A couple of months later I had expanded it to one hour (30 minutes was just way to short!); and a few months after that I had added a second one-hour book show that specialized on science fiction (The Sci-Fi & Fantasy Hour with James Andrew Cox—I think I was born with an ego as big as that program title!).

John Ohliger was a professor in the field of Adult Education and Life Long Learning. He was also an ardent social activist. He had been one of the key people to establish WORT-FM as a commercial free “talk show” radio forum for public issues. He started up The Madison Review Of Books as one of his experiments in adult education. He wanted to see what would happen if you put brand new books in the hands of ordinary folk—cab drivers, housewives, students, social workers, janitors, etc.—and then gave them a forum from which they could express their opinions and critiques to the community at large.

Back in the 70s, book reviewing (as it had been for pretty much the previous century) was largely an elitist operation of the New York/East Coast literati. John Ohliger (populist and leftist agitator that he was) wanted to break that stranglehold and see what would happen.

So John Ohliger started up his little radio show, got 15 of the major publishers to send him some books, and sent folks like Hank Luttrell out into the Madison community to recruit folks like me into sharing our views of what we were reading and what was being published.

I, along with a half-dozen others, banded together with John Ohliger and operated that little book review. I hosted the radio show and did most of the grunt work of publisher notification, book solicitation, and assigned reviewer follow-ups.

Then two years later, John Ohliger was working with still another group of citizens who wanted to insure a public access channel in the newly arriving television cable company (if I remember rightly it was Viking Media) that was then wiring up Madison. John talked me into going with him to endless meetings in small non-air-conditioned rooms over that sidewalk egg-frying Wisconsin summer. In the end, we were chartered by the City of Madison and contracted with the cable company as the Madison Community Access Center—Cable Channel 4. The first show we taped was with a heart specialist doctor. The second show we taped was the television version of our little radio book review show.

I still remember that first television production. I hosted. We had one black/white television camera. We had one chair. We also had one guest. I

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

introduced the book review program. Then a huge poster board sign was held by hand directly in front of the camera lens. I jumped up out of the one chair we had. Our guest sat down in it. Then I proceeded to interview him while standing next to the camera. When we were ready to wrap, the poster board sign went back up in front of the camera lens. The guest got up. I sat down. The poster board sign was whipped away. And I said farewell to the viewing audience.

The whole affair was the very definition of amateur—but we were all thrilled to enter this new medium of public access television and spread the word about books.

That show became “Bookwatch” and ran from 1978 to 2003 with me as its host. Our crew were always volunteers who donated their time for a sheer love of the cause. And the studio quality of our productions would match and occasionally surpass what PBS was doing.

Because of health problems slowing me down I finally had to retire after almost three decades from the television part of our Midwest Book Review operation in January 2003. But the show didn’t disappear from the air for another 8 months or so. My producer/director had such a large backlog of old shows that he ran them in our regular Wednesday night time slot on WYOU-TV (which emerged in the early 1980s out of that original MCAC group) until finally the archives were exhausted.

In 1980 my job as a Developmental Disabilities Coordinator (a glorified kind of school social worker) for the Broadhead School District was terminated through lack of funding. Ronald Reagan had been elected president and one of the things he did in collusion with a conservative congress was to gut the money devoted to special education. Another program funding that was gutted had to do with Federal money for public library systems.

As a social worker I saw the writing on the wall for social services spending for the next few years. So I took my 30 hour a week “hobby” as a book reviewer and turned it into a full time profession. John Ohliger and I parted company over that. He was an altruist and a social reformer who felt that his little experiment should remain as band of local Madison community part-timers who were in it for the honor of it all. I wanted to go national, launch a library newsletter, expand out onto the internet, and be able to support myself.

I was primarily responsible for the necessary grunt work (read office work) that kept the wheels turning and the pump priming. Three weeks after I left his little book review operation it collapsed because no one wanted to take over the hard work of writing letters, sending out tear sheets, following-up review assignments, emptying the trash, manning the phone, etc.

It was sort of like the story of Henny Penny who easily found all manner of animal friends to eat her bread—but none to help her plant it, weed it, harvest the grain, prepare the dough, or even bake the loaf.

Everyone like the idea of free books (you got to keep the book you reviewed) but nobody wanted to do the day-to-day grind that insured there would be free books to hand out for review.

I borrowed \$1000 from my father-in-law to buy letterhead stationary, a

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

computer, and some postage—and never looked back.

Over the years John and I would come across one another. Madison is that kind of community. He was constantly involved in one or another group, issue, cause, or experiment. He hung out with the likes of Noam Chomsky and was always up for this or that demonstration or movement for social justice.

I always acknowledged my debt to John as my mentor and the man who made my subsequent career as a book reviewer and as the editor-in-chief of a multi-media book review operation possible.

The late John Ohliger (he died some years ago at the age of 77) was a dramatic and lasting influence on my life and career as a book reviewer and on the Midwest Book Review.

Smallwood: It was good to see that self-published authors are not turned away and you give priority consideration to small presses as well as the academic and that it is possible to have a book reviewed. There are so many resources on your web under Writing and Publishing; Reader Resources! Also a search option and site map for The Midwest Book Review. How do you keep up with all of these?

Jim Cox: What you see now on the Midwest Book Review is the cumulative work of more than 40 years. At the current age of 76 I work in my little office 3 to 4 hours a day, seven days a week. When I get an idea or write something that I think would be of value to authors, publishers, librarians, book publicists, and/or the general reading public I pass it along to my daughter (who is the web master and Managing Editor of our book review operation) to get it up on our web site. The same applies to discoveries I make out on the web, as well as items of interest and relevance that other people bring to me attention. So our web site is a constantly expanding repository of useful information and resources specific to the writing, publishing, and marketing of books.

Smallwood: Besides helping publishers and writers, please tell readers about how you make your reviews available to U.S. and Canadian libraries?

Jim Cox: We have two monthly contracts with companies that maintain book review databases for libraries and library systems.

One of them is the Gale Cengage Learning's 'Book Review Index'. Here are some links that describe and explain what that is:

https://assets.cengage.com/pdf/fs_BRI-online.pdf
<https://www.amazon.com/Book-Review-Index-2018-Subscription/dp/1410328120>
<https://www.gale.com/c/book-review-index-plus>

The other one is CLCD Enterprise and has a book review database exclusive to children's books preschool through young adult, fiction and non-fiction. Here is a link to them: <http://www.clcd.com/#/welcome>

In addition, we have library mailing lists for hundreds of community, academic, government, and corporate libraries for our monthly book review publications including the one specifically called "Library Book-

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

watch”.

Smallwood: What seems the most heavily used links of all your resources offered on your web or the topics you get the most questions?

Jim Cox: The three most clicked on sections of our rather massive web site are:

Advice for Writers & Publishers (an archive of my ‘how to’ articles):

<http://www.midwestbookreview.com/bookbiz/advice/advice.htm>

Other Reviewers (a database I created of freelance book reviewers, book review publications, book review web sites and blogs): http://www.midwestbookreview.com/links/othr_rev.htm

Jim Cox Report (my monthly column of advice, commentary, tips, tricks & techniques for marketing books):

<http://www.midwestbookreview.com/bookbiz/jimcox.htm>

As for topics, I get asked about pretty much everything and anything that has to do with the publishing and marketing of books.

For example, just yesterday I got a phone call (asking me what she could do) from an author who used a POD (publish on demand) company who was apparently in continuous violation with respect to their contract.

The day before that I got a phone call asking about copyright law.

It’s a rare week that goes by when someone doesn’t email me or phone me with a question about some aspect of getting published or getting their books noticed in the highly competitive book business.

Smallwood: What resources do you have for the General Reading Public? Those interested in Children’s Books?

Jim Cox: For the general reading public we archive all nine of our monthly book review publications on our website. Additionally, each of them can be directly subscribed to for free just by sending me an email asking to be signed up for one or more of them.

With specific reference to children’s books, one of our nine monthly book review publications is the “Children’s Bookwatch” for kids books, preschool through young adult, fiction and non-fiction. Here’s a direct link to where they are archived on our web site:

<http://www.midwestbookreview.com/cbw/index.htm>

Smallwood: Midwest Book Review has no advertising, banners. How does it manage?

When I have submitted reviews, I’m informed when they are posted which is a great courtesy. Thank you for all you have done for writers! Do you have something new in the works for your amazing website?

Jim Cox: We are primarily funded by two annual foundation grants for the purpose of promoting literacy, library usage, and small press publishing. That’s why we accept no advertising or charge for the reviews of published (hardcover or paperback) books.

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

It's common place for us to receive more good books than we have the reviewer resources to handle them all. So for any book that passes our initial screening but ultimately fails to achieve a review assignment simply because of 'too many books, not enough reviewers' we have a kind of safety net option so that the book can at least be drawn to the attention of librarians, booksellers, and the general reading public subscribers. If that author or publisher has a review from anyone else, and if they obtain that reviewer's permission for us to do, so we will run that review in their behalf and under the reviewer's byline in our monthly book review publication "Reviewer's Bookwatch". There is no charge for this service.

We do have a \$50 Reader Free option for authors or publishers who want a review of a digital (Kindle) book, or a not yet published manuscript, galley, uncorrected proof, pdf file, or ARC (advanced reading copy). But under this option it should be noted that the reader fee goes directly to the authorized and assigned reviewer—not to the Midwest Book Review. What I get out of it for being the 'middle man' in getting the author and reviewer together is that if the author approves of the review then I get to run it in our own monthly book review publications.

As the editor-in-chief of a book review operation, at the very beginning of this little enterprise I hit upon two strategies that have proven immensely successful over the decades.

The first was to give priority consideration to self-published and small press published authors because they were a part of the publishing industry that was deliberately neglected by the major book review publications back then –and to a large extent, even now.

The second was to always provide that author or publisher with a copy of the review and a cover letter informing them of all the places we had published or posted our review of their book— back then (and often still now) a practice not routinely done by the Publishers Weekly, library journals, or New York Times Review of Books of today.

So to leave your readers one last thought about the role and mission of the Midwest Book Review and its editor-in-chief: Our purpose and goal is to help writers to write better, publishers to publish more profitably, librarians to make more informed considerations for what they should add to their collections, and to bring to the attention of the general reading public worthwhile books that they might otherwise never know about.

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