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# Interview: Rob Nelsen

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# *Writer, Teacher, Editor: An Interview with Robert Nelsen*

by Don Killen

Robert S. Nelsen, a professor at The University of Texas at Dallas, teaches fiction writing and literary studies to graduate and undergraduate students. Dr. Nelsen has published numerous short stories and many academic papers dealing with philosophy and politics. He has recently finished a collection of short stories, Orphans, Bums and Angels. His stories reach into the depths of human experience and produce moments when readers are forced to stop and think--think about life and love and that which matters. Dr. Nelsen received his Ph.D. at The University of Chicago. He is Executive Editor of Common Knowledge, a new journal published by Oxford University Press.

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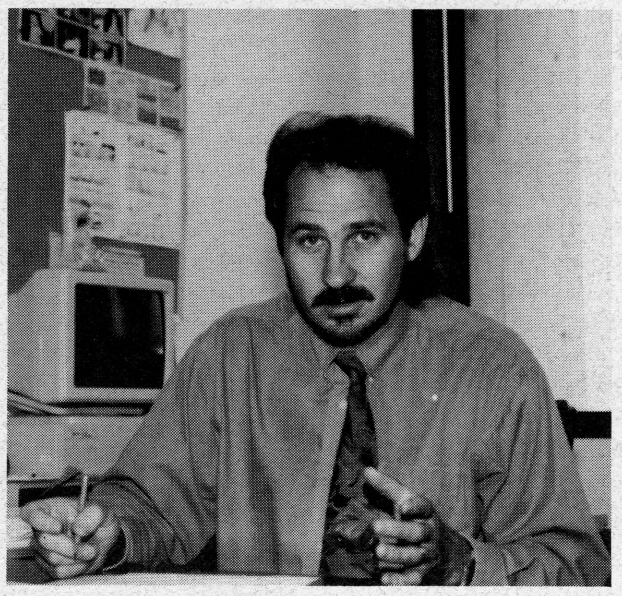
FORCES: Dr. Nelsen, you're a professor teaching literature at U.T.D., you're the Executive Editor of a brand new eclectic, interdisciplinary, highly international journal called Common Knowledge, you've written and published a number of short stories, some of which have won prizes. What motivates you to write?



NELSEN: On my bulletin board is a story I wrote when I was five: "It all started in a house down in Getalong, Utah, where Snicklefritz lived." I think I write so that I can write better than I did when I wrote that story. I write because that's what I do, that's what I am. People aren't writers because they're born that way—they're only writers if they wrote that day. This morning I got up early and wrote, so today I'm a writer. If I don't get up and write tomorrow morning, I won't be a writer—I am, because I will get up early again tomorrow. My motivation has a lot to do with competition with myself, with being better than I was. Also, I'm a left-over from the sixties—I still want to change the world. In the sixties I thought I could do it by protesting, by establishing scholarships for black athletes, by leading groups on marches. None of that stuff really worked. We didn't make a lasting difference. Everything seems to be getting worse—or at least it's not as good as I want it to be. I hope that if fiction can be used not as a weapon but as a way of communication, then maybe there's still a way to change individuals, maybe even the world.

FO: The pen is mighter than the sword.

NE: Yes. Each one of my stories is meant to move someone. In my classes, in my stories, I stress closure. The reason I want closure is because that's the only way I am certain that someone will be moved.

FO: So, your primary motivation is an epiphany or a part of the story which moves someone?

NE: Joyce coined the phrase "epiphany." He believed that an epiphany is supposed to give the "whatness" of life. I don't know what "whatness" is, but I know that if there is closure, there is a moment of pause, a moment of stillness, a moment of thought. That's real communication, even if it's silent communication. It's not a message, it's not a theme. And I write for that purpose: I write to provide those moments of silence and thought.

FO: Moments when the reader says, "Oh, that's what."

NE: Even if they don't know "that's what," even if they just go, "oh, oh, shit, what's going on here?" The pause. We don't pause enough in our lives today, and one of the powers of fiction is to make you pause. There is no pause in movies—we go simply for the entertainment. Aristotle said that the highest pleasure was imitation, imitation that involves education. It's not that you educate through writing so that readers actually learn x, y, or z. It's that if they have this moment of pause, they might learn something.

FO: How would you describe the process you use in writing or teaching writing?

NE: For me, writing has to be discovery. If you write what you know, you won't discover anything. If you write what you don't know, I think the possibility of discovering something is much greater. I try to teach people that they don't need to write their autobiographies, that they don't need to depend on their real lives. The meaning that is within their souls will be captured on the page if they write what they don't know. Flannery O'Connor said (and Robert Frost

said something very similar) that if the writer doesn't discover something, then how do we expect the reader to discover anything. So, I try to teach that you begin by putting your soul in jeapordy with the first sentence, and then you prosecute forward from that first sentence to the last sentence, each sentence leading into the next, each sentence trying to discover something from the last sentence.

FO: A process of self discovery?

NE: It's self-discovery by the creation of a plot that doesn't have anything to do with you. It does have to do with the meaning of you, but not with the historical you.

FO: In your classes, you say to write about your obsessions, to write about what matters to you.

NE: People come to the class with stories they want to tell. They trust those stories; they believe that those stories have meaning in them. They want to communicate. All of us want to communicate when we write. We want to give something meaningful to someone else. They worry that they will not be able to communicate unless they communicate a plot that they know. I think that if you write a first sentence that puts you in jeapordy, that if you get one of your personal obsessions in that first sentence, you will slather yourself all over the page. You will guarantee meaning on the page. I have many obsessions. My son, my father, my relationship to him and to my son. Every one of my stories has something to do with a father—not with my father—even if they don't have fathers in them. I'm obsessed with fathers, and the depths in the stories come from that obsession. And I'm obsessed with baptism and the role of religion, so all my stories have baptisms and blood in them, even if not overtly.

FO: Who are some of your favorite authors today?

NE: Among the younger generation, Amy Hemple, she's wonderful. Rick Bass, from here in Texas, living in Montana; Richard Ford, Mark Richard. Some that are older: Bobby Ann Mason and William Gass. The best fiction, I think, might be being written outside the United States. Milan Kundera's fiction is wonderful, Gyorgy Konrad's new novel The Feast in the Garden is exceptional. In Latin America, Lisa Valenzuela, Isabel Allende, Vargas Llosa, and Eduardo Galeano.

FO: UTD, as well as Collin County Community College, have taken a strong interdisciplinary approach in teaching arts and humanities. How do you feel that arts outside the pure literary have affected your work or your approach to writing? Do you use other arts in your research, for example?

NE: Yes. I came to UTD because of its interdisciplinary nature. I came here because I wanted to explore. Fiction needs to be creative. It's important to me to be able to watch others create. I just spent some time with a student who's finishing a novel. I've been encouraging her to listen to music, because she's trying to do some modernist things in the novel. She's putting together different scenes, different sections. She's trying to create a collage. It needs to work like a symphony. We talked for a long time about how every movement in a symphony needs closure. Each one of her chapters needs the same sort of closure. I wish this were my idea—it's not, it's Milan Kundera's idea. Flannery O'Connor said all writers should be painters, even if they're not good, because painting is a way to discover; self portraits help us discover ourselves. Try painting yourself and you'll find that you really can't capture yourself perfectly on the page or on the canvas. You'll capture instead some grotesque, stylized version of yourself, a startling image. What we're trying to do in fiction is get that startling image, that one part, one side of ourselves onto the page. So, if you can paint yourself and only paint that mole on your nose, it will be good. I don't do much with film or television. As I tell students, you can't out-whore a whore. I cannot create in fiction better pectorals or better breasts or more beautiful bodies than Arnold Swartzenneger or Kim Basinger have. Likewise my car wrecks will never be as good as something that happens on film. So you're better off using traditional art if you want to incorporate art into your fiction. I avoid the newer arts such as film.

FO: You grew up in Montana near Hemingway's home, didn't you?

NE: I grew up around all sorts of writers. The one I remember the most was a writer from the '60s, Richard Brautigan. Brautigan was there—he was one of the locals who went through town all the time. There were a lot of writers there. Ford, McGuane, all sorts of people.

FO: Was this an influence on you at an early age?

NE: No, it actually turned me off writing. We were quite poor, and I wanted to get out of the valley. The writers all came to the valley, so that didn't look like an avenue out. The goal to teach, to be a professor, to know something that other people didn't know—that really drove me on and had more influence than the writers. Then, once I learned how to really read fiction—the fiction on the board here (age 5) is terrible—I began to write. Everybody has this instinct to tell stories. We all want to tell stories. But it's mostly terrible. Back when I was five, I tried to do what I now preach you can't do. My job as a teacher is to teach students not how to write, but rather how to read.

FO: To slow down and read as writers?

NE: To read as writers. There's a real difference. In a normal literature class—I didn't know this when I left

the valley (in Montana)—you're taught to read for theme and meaning and plot. What I eventually learned was to read as a writer, to read for techniques, to see how writers repeated objects, to see how they exploited an object, to see how they went from here to here, not concentrating on the action, but rather concentrating on the objects in the story. Once I learned to read, I found out how easy it was to write. It's really easy. But I've ruined reading for myself, because I can't read for plot or story or entertainment any more. I'm trying to rip off some writer. I want to see what they did, and I'm determined to do it better, damn it. Once you see how easy it is, then you can't help but want to write. We have this natural urge to tell lies, to tell stories, to entertain. If you find out you can be good, then you want to do it.

FO: How has landscape, a sense of place, affected your work?

NE: Writing needs to be rooted. It has to be rooted in concrete objects. You can't write without having a strong sense of place in writing. Being in Texas, my roots are changing. In Chicago, the stories I was writing were more urban, they had to do with the urban setting. And the concerns were urban. Here, it's not the same. We're going to Paris, Texas, this weekend because there's a cemetery there with a statue of Jesus wearing cowboy boots. The novel I'm writing now is set entirely within a cemetery. So I'm going to go there to rip off that image; it's moving to my cemetery. So you certainly need that sort of landscape.

FO: How would you describe the revision process in writing a short story or a novel?

NE: Flannery O'Connor—how much I love her—had a friend who had gotten some negative criticism on a story and was very disappointed and hurt by it, and Flannery O'Connor wrote back to this woman, "Well, if you've only rewritten it three times, of course it's supposed to be no good." James Joyce, when the galleys would come back to him, would rewrite all over the galleys. You're not supposed to touch galleys; they're the final proof. But Joyce got busy rewriting. Raymond Carver would rewrite stories up to 40 times. Flannery O'Connor again: the first story that she wrote was under her bed when she died—she had completely rewritten it. Rewriting is re-visioning. You have to re-see. Your vision is not right the first time. The idea is not to go back and correct your grammar, it's not even to go back and weird out the story so it's more particularized. It's to go back and re-see, to discover your obsessions and then to explore them further. Often the story will go in entirely new directions.

FO: So the story may turn out to be something quite different from what you thought it would be?

NE: It had better be something different than what you thought. Writing is about discovery. Not just in the first draft—there ought to be discovery in the last draft, too.

FO: So you discover something about yourself, you discover something about your obsessions?

NE: And you discover something about the story itself. It takes on a life of its own.

FO: Do you think that creative writing classes would be beneficial for people who have no intention to pursue a writing career?

NE: Creativity is essential to whatever we do. I mean, why live unless we're being creative? I think that the tools that you learn in a creative writing class are applicable elsewhere. I tell my students that I have three goals for them. I want them to be outrageous, I want them to learn to paint with words, and I want them to exploit the words. I think those three goals apply no matter what you're going to do in an academic setting. A very bad or a very good scientific paper should be painted with words. And it should be exploitative, and it should be outrageous. But creative writing classes will only be valuable for people who can handle the criticism that needs to be a part of that class. I think that there are a lot of people who can't handle the criticism. They need to go on and do other things.

FO: How did James Joyce influence your work?

NE: Partially through epiphanies. He wanted the closure I want in stories. But he wanted more than closure, he wanted beauty. He pushed the language to the extreme. He was always willing to experiment. Ulysses, I guess, is my favorite novel, if you can have a favorite novel. It is the one that I go back to and learn from constantly. Joyce was always experimenting, always trying to do something different with the language, and he knew, more than any other writer that I know, that all he had was words. He wasn't afraid to do what he wanted with those words.

FO: He had words, mixed up many ways...

NE: The other thing that influenced me about Joyce is that—here's the world's greatest writer, yet he is a man who wrote to his wife when they were separated asking her to send her dirty underpants to him. He was a normal guy. He was a sexual being—he was a dirty old man in his own sort of way. He did not want to forget what Nora smelled like, and he needed that part of his life. He wasn't going to go see a prostitute, he wanted his wife, so he said, "send me your dirty underpants." I respect that, although it might sound bizarre. He was a real person. He needed his family. He needed her. He was poor, he was always borrowing money, but never did he stop being himself. He had a son and a daughter who had serious problems: the daughter was institutionalized. He kept that part of his life separate.

He didn't exploit his family in a negative way. He didn't use their experiences. He wrote his fiction, and yet he worked hard to be a father. We have these myths of the lonely writer, in the garret, out there inventing. It's all bull.

FO: What do "real writers" do?

NE: They're the most boring people I've ever known. And I know a lot of writers. They're also obnoxious. For example, if you come to my house, I'll start reading my stories because I'm trying them out on you—I want your reaction. There are the Keroacs out there who are able to be halfway crazy, but most contemporary writers are very boring, obnoxious people.

FO: What is your advice to young writers, those who aspire to writing but are not certain that it could pay or sustain them, or if they could even be successful at it?

NE: If you're in it for the money, stop. There's no money there. You're going to have to teach or edit or something. I read a statistic that over 70 percent of people graduating from major creative writing programs are now doing advertising and no longer writing. So if you're in it for the money, you have to stop. My advice is to find out if you are a writer. As I said, you are a writer only if you wrote today. So, my advice is to start writing and find out if you can write, and if you can write...

FO: So, if you think you want to be a writer, how should you pursue this? Should you take a creative writing class? Should you study basic skills first?

NE: You should devour literature first. You should read each and every thing you possibly can. You should find your own canon. You don't learn to write by imitating others; you learn to write by writing sentences that are good enough that James Joyce would have been proud of you for writing that sentence. How will you know he's proud of you? You can't go knock on his door and ask unless you've read everything he's written. I think you need to read literature, find your heroes and heroines and set them as your standards and your goals. That's why if you want to write popular literature, if you want Tom Clancy to be proud of you, read everything Tom Clancy wrote and write sentences that Tom Clancy would be proud of. I use James Joyce, I use Richard Hugo, I use Flannery O'Connor. Pick whomever you need to use—again, by devouring. Then, if you want, go on to a creative writing class. It's more important, however, that you find friends who will read your fiction and who can be critical of your work. The greatest writers never had creative writing classes. They're a modern phenomenon. Flannery O'Connor was one of the first who began with creative writing classes. But what you need, and what she had (she had Caroline Gordon, she had all sorts of people who read her stories), is a community who will read your stories. If you can only find that at UTD or Collin County Community College, or someplace else, go there and find it. But find a community that will come back with strong criticism: "You need to do this, this and this, and this didn't work."

FO: Strong, but gentle?

NE: Strong, but gentle, but I'm not certain that any writer ever knows that it's gentle because it all feels like a whip. We all love our own work. If we didn't think that our story was the greatest story in the world, why put ourselves through the pain of writing? So, of course, any criticism hurts.

FO: Is it enough that the sentences that you write satisfy you?

NE: I don't think any writer is ever satisfied. I wish now that I could rewrite every sentence I've ever written and do it better. I know that sounds foolish and I know most people won't actually believe that. But you're constantly honing your craft, you're constantly learning, and you want to be better. I think I can write almost every sentence I've ever written better than it is now.

FO: Which of your stories is the one that stands out as the one you would like to be remembered for?

NE: The two pages I wrote this morning. Everything has to be better every day. Everything I've written to this point I'm embarrassed by because it's not as good as I want it to be. "Angel and Me" takes me home and allows me to understand what it means to love. I like the sentiment in that story. Most people don't like that story because of the sentiment. I'm a very sentimental person, so I guess that's the closest. On the other hand, in "The Shield She Being Built," a story I can't even get published, there is a moment in there where a little boy touches a tattoo on his father's arm, and he know's what it means to love. Anyway, that's probably as good as anything I've done, that moment where he touches. One of the myths that beginners have is that they think that they have to find their voice. Each story requires a different voice. It has to be true to the story. So I hope that each story is radically different and that none of them typify Robert Nelsen.

FO: Do you consciously try to make them different?

NE: If you start with a unique, dangerous first sentence and move forward, if you let that sentence be your conscience, you don't have to worry about being different—the sentences will make you different.