

Interview with nthWord - Lucien Senna and Ryan O'Connor

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Ryan O'Connor is editor-in-chief of the online magazine nthWord.

Lucien Quincy Senna is a graduate of Harvard and Oxford University. She is a poet, writer, activist, legal sleuth, and mother.

nthWord: If you're a writer or a reader and haven't yet checked out Red Lemonade—a new experiment in community publishing—some interesting things are happening. Take this interview between poet Lucien Senna and flash fiction writer Marcus Speh for example, in which they discuss the benefits of social publishing, cross disciplinary influence, having a German inner critic, and writing about genitals... among other subjects. (Since the platform is interactive, I had the opportunity to tag on a couple questions to the dialogue.)

Lucien Senna: Why did you choose Red Lemonade as a forum for your work? You already have quite a sizeable cult following and numerous awards. Was it to get feedback or look at works in progress a la, what is nouvelle cuisine?

Marcus Speh: In the cold light of this autumn day, "sizeable cult following" and "numerous awards", albeit flattering, translate into a few dozen good writer friends, several hundred readers per story¹ and some net nominations². – Though I'm grateful for the feedback that I've received, I'm really looking for publication & support. Perhaps in reverse order when I think about it. Because I believe support based on mutuality and integrity will inevitably lead to publication as long as the writing is good. And support is especially important for me as a German writer who only writes in English and lives (for the most part) among Germans.

¹ Parts first published at: redlemona.de and nthWord:
<http://shorts.nthword.com/2011/10/interactive-interview-marcus-speh.html>

Before you said it, I wasn't really aware that a "look at works in progress" might be a motivation, too, but of course it is. This is true even if the work as such is not what I would normally read or purchase, because as a writer I find anything written and published interesting as a way of gauging my own efforts: of style; of content; of presentation, too. Since publishing excerpts of "House of Worship"[3](#), I especially appreciate the opportunity to show a whole work as a mockup. I've also enjoyed seeing what other writers do with the feedback they receive. It has helped me realize what a feeble Philistine I am when it comes to working with responses to my own work. This is something I need to explore much more & it doesn't come easy.

Lucien Senna: Before we delve into your prose/flash fiction, is it about including photographs which you may or may not have taken? Are they essential to the Flash of your fiction, like polygraph tests. Some of the photos allude to the subject but others are suggestions of something else. Explain please.

Marcus Speh: Isn't "delving into flash fiction" rather like taking a header into a shallow pool? Or is it akin to a dive into a pool assumed to be shallow, which then turns out to be a lot deeper...I'm ambivalent myself, and I'm quite interested in and excited about discussing flash in this community, rather than over at fictionaut[4](#) where the majority of stories is flash. But about those photographs: the photos are not essential to the final flashes, but they're essential to my writing process. I like your comparison with "polygraph tests". Perhaps the photos are forensic utensils. Flash may depend more on images, especially on instantly gripping images, than other forms. Really more like poetry in this respect. If you only have 200 words of prose to tell a story, you cannot skirt the story, and a strong polaroid-like image may be the best way to start. My flash "Before the Bloodbath"[5](#) comes to mind. It summons a strong image using only the title (which contains the entire story, actually). The rest of the piece could be seen as no more than a swag of this initial image. The whole flash started with a photo as a prompt, "Ireland", by Claude Le Gal-

17. But it's rather rare that I begin with a photo. More often, a photo sustains the editing and sharpening of something already (half) written.

One of the issue of tying yourself and your words to explicit, photographic images is that I find it hard after a while to see the text as independent and separate. I will create another version of "House of Worship" without photos, and I'm looking forward to the result.

LS: Living in Berlin and your German roots, seem vital to your identity as a writer. That must be complicated given most of the world's attitudes towards Germany, its heavy historico-political past and present. What is your attitude towards being German and what does it mean to you as you describe your own work as Germanic?

MS: I will try to stick to your question (I don't know why I find this so hard...) – My attitude towards Germany is highly ambivalent: that's normal for Germans since the Great War and also rooted in the fact that my grandfather was (but didn't die) in a concentration camp; what's not so normal is that I lived abroad (in the UK mostly, but also in Italy) for many years & that I've been married to two foreigners & that I speak English at home, teach in English & write in English, and that my best friends aren't German either (or live abroad as well). I really live the life of an expatriate in my homeland. I don't resent it at all, and it probably feeds my art in mysterious ways. I sometimes wonder what my writing would be like if I lived in the US where most of my (online) readers & writer friends come from. When I wrote while being there in the past, my writing tended to change (both style and subject)—check out "Three Suggestions For Writers Exiled To Texas"², which I wrote during a Texas vacation last year. – The attribute "Germanic" for my story collection was meant to provoke, and I would not like to live with it as the only label –the other two, "absurd" and "existential" are just as, if not more important.

In Germany, absurdism and existentialism (we'll get to Heidegger later) have a long, glorious, tradition, which is both anti-fascist and anti-imperialist. Kurt Schwit-

ters¹⁰ and the dadaists, Max Ernst¹¹ and the surrealists, experimental writers like Arno Schmidt¹², and the enthusiasm with which Fluxus¹³ was greeted in post-war Germany are only a few examples. So what may be the cliché of “Germanic”, some sort of large-bodied, blond stupefaction leading to the holocaust, is not what I had in mind, but rather the post/modern continuation of a German heritage of thought and a concern and preference for profundity. Often pitch dark and usually, alas, devoid of the lovely humor that characterizes Anglo-Saxon writing. The Germanic literary attitude is reminiscent of late 19th century Russian writing & results for me personally in preferring Dostoyevsky over pretty much any writer past or present. Never mind Nabokov, who thought Dostoyevsky unbearably sentimental and structurally confused (“living in a wasteland of literary platitudes”¹⁴)—while I think Nabokov, a rather shallow superb stylist, could not take the depth of his own people. But I digress. This is perhaps too big a topic for a small interview...but what would really interest me: do readers see anything “Germanic” in my work, and how do they respond to it?

LS: “Flash Fiction” is a series of almost poems—or short stories with a poetic edge to them. You did make a conscious decision to utilise this format. As a poet, I am interested in how you make it work because the shorter the piece, the more careful you have to be with every word and line, especially in a language which I assume is not your first. Why did you choose this format?

MS: English is indeed my second language. It is a great language to write in... I’m not the first to have observed this. Why great? For me, writing in another than my native tongue means that I can bring all the linguistic playfulness to the language without having to worry too much about the burdens of the native. Like Beckett, writing in another language allows me to write “without style.” The burden of the native tongue, at least in my case, is an inner critic who looks like a German general. Please imagine Rommel ¹⁵ on speed. He is a lot stronger, fiercer, and meaner than any internal English-speaking critic could ever be. He’s got no sense

of humor. When I propose “Mango” or “Salsa”, he retorts with “Sauerkraut” and “Walzer”. That’s the extent to which I feel inhibited to write prose in German. Translating into German is possible and I’ve done it¹⁶. Translating into German and back into English is actually one of my preferred ways of dealing with really difficult editing issues. When I miss the forest for the trees, I translate a passage into German—the translated version is a different beast altogether—and when I translate it back to the original English, the problem oftentimes has disappeared altogether. I conclude that there’s a magic not just in, but between languages, that Beckett, Nabokov, Conrad, and other bilingual writers must have not just felt but exploited. This is great company to be in.—As for the choice of flash as a format, I’d like to say that the format chose me rather than the other way around. I’m not a natural short story writer at all. I can be meticulous, but I hate myself that way. I once wrote 300 poems in a year and they were all bad. But flash, which for me really isn’t the same as “prose poem”, is a natural medium for the web and I’m a natural on the web. I’ve talked about flash before aplenty & as a writer I feel that I’ve come to the end of my flash though I’ll continue employing flash as a medium, or substrate, for the longer forms that I’m writing now, a method that’s been identified by the novelist and theorist John Gardner as “fictional pointillism” (see the thread by Michael Vagnetti on Red Lemonade¹⁷), which both in style and process of creation is perfectly adapted to my current work, life and writing habits.

LS: “The Serious Writer and his Penis” and the “Serious Writer and her Bush” are starkly different but linked as their titles suggest. You say you don’t like the humorous part of the Penis section—one which is funny in a Freudian way--the Bush is more of a serious piece of work and has moments of intense beauty. Which do you prefer, the erotic or the poetic or the semicomedic?

MS: It’s easy to underestimate “The Serious Writer And His Penis”¹⁸We’re not supposed to take genitals seriously, especially male genitals. (True, they’re funny-looking). This story can be read as a cultural commentary with secret traps, pitfalls

and characters that are real enough (the story talks more about women than about men). There's a shift of attention from the hypnotizing quality of the genital (interesting really only to lovers, not readers) to humor as a relationship quality (interesting to everyone). I poke fun of the propensity of men to fixate on size. I think I simply wanted to drag the sorry sausage out into the open and see what I could do with it without having to touch it, as it were. As a flash I find the penis story altogether richer and more serious than the prose poem "The Serious Writer And Her Bush"[19](#), which is not about genitals at all (except through the pun in the title) but...well, I don't really know. It's locked, too poetic for surgery. I accept this last piece as a word-plant that grew organically in my head. It's not hard to

like. I came up with this character "The Serious Writer" in 2009 and have written dozens of stories for him. I think I could write a whole book of these ditties, but I'm afraid he's too transparently me and too focused on his writing to be interesting to a wider audience. (As an aside: the online zine Pure Slush publishes my five last installments of the series this month—beginning with "The Serious Writer's Mother"[20](#)—what could be more serious?)—Regarding your question, I would have to say that I couldn't pick one: I'd always try to put all three in the soup with some philosophy as cream on top, perhaps trying to hard.

LS: "Fundamentalist Teenagers in front of a Metropolitan Railway Car."—Are they considering suicide by trying to get run over? You make it unclear and no God Nietzschean. Is that what you intended?

MS: "Four Fundamentalist Teenagers In Front Of A Metropolitan Railway Car"[21](#)" was created in response to a visual prompt[22](#) as part of a contest[23](#). Your response makes me wonder about the life of a text separated from the image that co-created it. Who's the author and what's the story once the text flies about the world on its own like Tucholsky's lonely knee[24](#) that was separated from a soldier and went off to see the world...If I beam myself back to November 2009, I remember that the first line, the teenagers yawning before school, came to me while watching my

daughter in second grade getting ready for class. There had been a terrible shooting at a German school that year, too²⁵. When I then turned the teenagers into little terrorists, I felt the seriousness of the implied accusation needed some smoothing similar to Lessing's play "Nathan the Wise"²⁶ from 1779. Germans read this play in school as an example of bridging religious and ideological conflicts. It had always impressed me how Lessing brings powerful representatives of the world's largest religions on stage making it possible for us (even today) to give all of them a fair hearing...So—I did not intend for the teenagers to consider suicide and though I like Nietzsche's text "The Antichrist"²⁷ very much, I did not think of "no God" but rather of "many gods" and I thought of the fact that teenagers everywhere have similar needs independent of the religious roof they live under.— Whatever the intent, I like that piece for its irreverence which may come from the wildness of the characters: anything can happen, right? And their clothes allude to a land beyond our land, a dreamt land: I still kind of remember that state of mind as a teenager, the sea of possibilities, unfiltered by knowledge, beautifully "boisterous" (the attribute that carries my passion in this short piece).

LS: We both are tied to Derrida, Lacan, Hegel, Heidegger and their assessment of the human condition. Is your work affected by them?

MS: I've moved away from all of them though I still feel somewhat close to Heidegger. Derrida is over-laden, and I no longer believe that looking at con/text makes us better people/writers/readers or whatever. Lacan's gone sour for me after the Sokal/Bricmont controversy²⁸ (I'm a physicist like Alan Sokal, whom I know well), though I do hold the importance of the unconscious in high esteem—not just on general grounds but as a more than accidental tourist of our writing. I believe with John Gardner that it is the role of the author to create a "vivid and continuous dream"³⁶ for the reader. This is undoubtedly easier for the novelist than for the (prose) poet or flash writer (the unconscious loves stability and needs a certain length of runway for take-off and landing) but it's impossible to create said "dream"

without the collusion of the unconscious. Now, Heidegger I still dig, because his only real interest was “being” (or non-being) and that’s the central concern of my writing, too. I don’t share the criticism of Hegelians concerning e.g. Heidegger’s use of language because I don’t think you can write about human existence, death and infinity without going into a blur, without merging with the deity in some profound sense that defies physics because it lies so far beyond (today’s) physics. When I’m in the deepest pain, I want a poem or “language gone riot” (Russell about Heidegger), otherwise I’d have a glass of milk and a cookie. That’s also why I really prefer Camus and Sartre, because they don’t succumb to logic in the face of death, or to even cheaper positions of discourse. Your guess that I am informed (either way) by those guys is correct. I’ve talked about this elsewhere²⁹ at length when talking about a flash I’d written on a torture scene: I do think writing about the human condition is what I’m about. As I said then: “If we don’t throw our weight behind life, decency and humanity, we’re nothing but word clowns.” This seems as good a way as any to end this interview—many thanks indeed for your wonderful questions, it was a great pleasure to answer them!

Since Red Lemonade allows for an “interactive” interview so to speak, I asked Marcus a couple additional questions:

nthWORD: Have any German authors had an influence on your writing? What were the books you read in school/university, if you studied in Germany?

MS: I studied physics not literature, so I’m self-taught as a reader and as a writer, too. Among German writers, Kafka, Thomas Mann, Freud and Nietzsche come to mind immediately. Kafka for his preference and mastery of the absurd and (as a stylist) the minimalist scene even in his novels. Thomas Mann and Freud live on the same mental page for me—Mann being the literary executor of Freud’s ideas. Freud himself was a master essayist: his German prose leaves little to be desired, especially his later anthropological works on religion and culture. I still love to read it though I may not agree with him. In all of these, but perhaps most in Niet-

zsche's often overheated writing, there's a wonderful depth and passion. Warms the heart.

Among the more recent authors, I have recently discovered (and enjoy) Arno Schmidt¹², and I've always liked Heinrich Böll and the Swiss authors Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt. But Schmidt is rather too experimental and cares too little about narrative and the fictional dream to be an example, and the others do seem a little dated to me now. Though, when I was younger, I fed on Frisch to find my place as a man in this world, and on Dürrenmatt because he was so refreshingly unromantic and dark (while much of German literature since Goethe has a tendency to cloying sentimentality). In fact, to me Kafka is the only German author who's aged well—and his work has merged with our culture to such a degree that I cannot read him now, I think, because it's just too much like stepping into the same river again and again. I believe E.M. Forster's estimation of English writers (in "Aspects of the Novel") is true for German writers as well: they don't quite make the cut when it comes to lasting literary philosophy of humanity, which is what I most care about and aspire to. This may come as an odd statement from a flash writer but when I look at my flash I see novels behind it—the flash fictions are the parts of a large stained-glass window that have already revealed themselves to me, the rest is still in the dark. And in this dark, pre-modern Russian and modern Irish (the "holy comic spirit"³⁷, J.O.B.) and French writers carry the light ahead, but not my own countrymen, alas—perhaps Robert Musil ("Man without properties") excepted. (Though why do I say "alas": in our time, for great writing, mother tongue may matter less compared to being plugged into the global collective unconscious). As a flash writer, Swiss writer Robert Walser³⁵ influenced me long before I wrote my own flash.

nthWORD: I recently read an interview with Palestinian poet and filmmaker Hind Shoufani who said she writes in English because she dreams in English,

though she enjoys reading in Arabic. Where do languages intersect for you as a writer?

MS: I don't dream in any particular language as far as I'm aware...but when I wake up with material that I later use for writing, it's in English; so if there's any German on my unconscious mind that I might mine for fiction, it's more deeply hidden...In my daily writing routine, German and English do intersect explicitly when I translate from the English original to German and back during editing. Also, I usually write in my journal early in the morning before I begin to draft, and the journal entries start in German and eventually turn to English, which is the sign that I'm ready to roll. On a more mundane sub-editing level, I do have to have a dictionary and a thesaurus at the ready & when I write fast I sometimes will put down the German word and look up the English equivalent later: you simply can't beat the hardwiring of your mother tongue.

You really got me thinking about my German language roots, Ryan. I missed out on three big ones—most foreigners know two of them: Brecht as a playwright and Rilke as a poet. They didn't come to my mind at first because they were no novelists but they've had the deepest influence on me and, of course, they're read in school. Rilke is loved, Brecht is feared a little in today's Germany, I think, because he was such a political loose cannon and despite his moving to East Berlin, did not quite fit in and still doesn't. The last one is a novelist with a peculiar story, Theodor Fontane³⁹. Started out as a journalist and didn't get to even write let alone publish a novel until his late fifties, but then he presented work that has touched me very much. His style is sometimes labeled as "poetic realism" and perhaps that's why I like him so much, and because of the display of ambiguity that so marked German culture and society in those days—subtly foreshadowing some of what was to come soon. ... There are many more, like the satirist Karl Kraus...but if I'm not out of time and space, I should be.

Marcus Speh lives in Berlin, Germany & blogs at Nothing To Flawnt. For this interview, he met

Lucien Quincy Senna at the online community Red Lemonade. Lucien blogs at Open Salon.

Post by Ryan O'Connor

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