Douglas Cole on Writing [1]

May 11, 2015 Becoming a Writer [2]

Interview by Kelcey Parker

TW is pleased to join author Kelcey Parker in co-publishing interviews with some of our featured writers. Kelcey's "How to Become a Writer" series appears on her website Ph.D. in Creative Writing *[3], where she's been running interviews with authors since July 2011. Each writer answers the same five questions.*



Douglas Cole has had work in *the Chicago Quarterly Review, Red Rock Review,* and *Midwest Quarterly*. He has published two poetry collections—*Interstate* (Night Ballet Press) and *Western Dream* (Finishing Line Press)—as well as a novella called *Ghost* with Blue Cubicle Press. He is currently on the faculty at Seattle Central College in Seattle, Washington.

Cole's short story "Wanderers" [4] appeared in the Winter 2014 issue of *Talking Writing*. TW has also just published his story "Hives" [5] in the Spring 2015 issue. Here's a sample:

> Jimmy's dad and Julie went to town to get some frozen pizzas, and Jimmy took me on a 'tour' of the place, which led straight to his dad and Julie's bedroom, where he opened a drawer in the nightstand and took out a handful of photographs and said, 'Here, look at these!' The pictures were mostly of Julie posing naked, like you'd see in a magazine.

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1. Why did you want to become a writer?

DC: When I was a kid in school, one of my English teachers assigned Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*. It was the first book I ever read all the way through. I was hooked, you know? I couldn't put it down and just became completely absorbed in it. It was very addictive and set me on a voracious reading journey. I think that was when I first caught a glimpse of the magic of words and stories.

Later, in another English class, my teacher, Mrs. Sheridan, had us write a descriptive piece. We were sitting in class, so I decided to just describe what I saw around me in the room. I don't remember it, except that I ended with a description of a poster on the wall of a ballet dancer and the words at the bottom of the poster: *Twyla Tharp*. I was just fooling around, but the teacher liked it and ended up reading it to the class. I liked that feeling. I liked being good at something. And I liked the way that writing also felt like I was doing something magical. I don't know how else to describe it, but I've been chasing after that feeling ever since.

2. How did you go about becoming a writer?

DC: I read everything I could, everything that I thought would teach me something, even if I didn't think I liked it at the time but I'd heard it was an important work. If a teacher assigned a story or a poem and I liked it, I'd go find that writer's books. I'd go to Moe's Bookstore [in Berkeley] and in a groping way just scan other books and read the first paragraph if a title caught my eye, give it that test and see if it grabbed me.

Once I started something, I would never put it down without finishing it. I felt almost a moral obligation to go all the way. And if I found writers I liked, I would absorb everything I could. I'd read everything they had written, even biographies and critical stuff on them and their work. I realize I was listening like a safecracker.

And I treated everything as somehow connected, or I'd look for a connection. Movies, for example, and how a filmmaker tells a story and sets a pace and a mood and works an image. Music, the same thing. How does a song work like a poem or a story, or what does it do differently that can be converted, and what does it do that I want to do? All my classes in college—philosophy, history, science, weight training, tennis!—what could they contribute? How did they relate? What could they teach me that would work for writing? I was that conscious about it. Friends? Any moment? I always thought in terms of creating. Not to sound pretentious, but Joyce said he wanted to convert everyday bread to the holy host. I took it that seriously.

3. Who helped you along the way, and how?

DC: Charlie, Chris, and Mike Steele. I met them when I was sixteen. Chris was going to the Pacific School of Religion, where my mother was a student. She and my mother were friends. And Chris brought her brother Charlie down to stay, there in Berkeley, right after he had finished college, and he and I became friends. On my seventeenth birthday, he gave me a copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with a big fat joint taped to the inside cover. Then their brother Mike came down a little while later. He was an actor and a musician and a writer. They were all talented musicians and writers and scholars, just beautiful people, physically, energetically.

Charlie turned me on to Richard Hugo and Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan and Miles Davis. They were intellectuals, poets, people who lived with passion and never said a dull thing or yawned. And I connected with them right away. They inspired me to love even more deeply what I already loved, and they helped make my love of the arts cool. They're still my family. I love them dearly and feel I owe them a great deal in terms of finding what would be the only real community I ever wanted in connection to writing. I've always been pretty private about it.

4. Can you tell me about a writer or artist whose biography inspires you?

DC: I love biographies. When I'm in a good one, it's like time travel or shape-shifting. A crazy leap into another world. Negative capability. Cold but intimate friends.

Reading Douglas Day's biography of Malcolm Lowry was almost as harrowing as reading *Under the Volcano.* I knew I was reading a genius when I read Richard Ellmann's biography of Joyce. I couldn't finish *The World as a Lie*, though,

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the biography of James Dickey [by Henry Hart]. And that's unusual for me. I love Dickey's work, of course, but I was going through some rough times, to be honest, and I just couldn't handle it. I still intend to go back and read it. I think that's one of the only times I can remember not finishing something I started. But as I get older, I've come to let go of that imperative a little. When you have less time, you treat it more dearly.

5. What would you say in a short letter to an aspiring writer?

DC: Read. Read everything you can. Study the world and write all the time in all forms and no form at all. Just write. Don't even think about publishing or money or fame. Just write and reach for that illusive image in your mind. I love what William Faulkner said when he received the National Book Award [in his 1955 acceptance speech [6]]: "I believe we will all agree that we failed. That what we made never quite matched and never will match the shape, the dream of perfection which we inherited and which drove us and will continue to drive us, even after each failure."

Keep your crap detector on, especially with yourself, but also have compassion. We're all struggling. So, be open. Think. Look for the connections. Experiment and be joyous. As John Gardner and so many others have said, write what you'd like to read. Write and write and write freely without concern for punctuation or intellectual coherence. Follow music, as Victor Hugo said. Meaning will come. And when you revise, revise ruthlessly. But always save a holy space for the private prayer of writing that's not for public consumption. That's your gold. That's your soul. Never sign anything in blood except for love. Dive into the dream and the unconscious ocean. Steal without guilt. See through the eye that's seeing and record your vision in whatever languages you know or create. Have no fear. You're always all right.

This interview originally appeared as "How Douglas Cole Became a Writer" [7] in Ph.D. in Creative Writing *on March 29, 2015.*

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