

Poet's Web

In our Poet's Web we present interviews with the featured poets at our poetry readings. This interview is with Michelle Cameron, author of a poetic narrative on the life and loves of William Shakespeare. In the Shadow of the Globe was named the Shakespeare Theatre of NJ's 2003-2004 Winter Book Selection.

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1. Michelle, your book is a poetic narrative on the lives and loves of William Shakespeare. Tell us about In the Shadow of the Globe. What sparked the initial idea? Share with us your interest in Shakespeare. Can you also tell us about the choices you had to make in highlighting key moments in his life through poetry?

The initial idea for *In the Shadow of the Globe* came from a BBC special that aired some 25 years ago, which described Shakespeare's acting life. Among the many fascinating details included was the fact that the actors would buy the cast-off clothes of nobles because, after all, what actor could act as a king if he was wearing the wrong quality clothes? This tidbit seemed to cry out to be developed into a novel — and it was a novel that I researched and wrote, for many years, until discovering the poetic narrative format.

The novel, while good enough to interest a New York agent (who held on to it for two dreadful years, asking for constant rewrites), never really took flight. One of the things I discovered was that I had not gotten deep enough under the skins of my protagonists — who were, at that point, an apprentice and a young woman who (what else?) dresses up as a boy. The peripheral scenes I wrote about Shakespeare and the actors seemed more vibrant than the actual plot line. That realization made me shift focus when I came to write the poetic narrative. The abbreviated format of poetry coupled with the ability to write in different voices — as in a play — gave me the ability to instantly engage with the characters' thoughts and emotions. The fact that I had lived with them for so many years shortcut the writing process, so all I had to do was sit back and let them dictate the stories they wanted me to tell.

In order to create a cohesive and interesting story, I had to make some conscious choices about how true I would be to the history, and I ended up collapsing a great deal of the chronology. Earlier drafts were arranged thematically — a section about apprentices; one about the love triangle; a third about the different actors. My editor and publisher, Bev Jackson, pointed out that this wasn't sufficient to move the plot along, and I needed a distinct

character — the fictional Mary Burbage — to serve as the glue to hold everything together. Bev urged me to cut many of the more cerebral poems and encouraged me to find more of the dirt and the passion of Elizabethan London. The original manuscript was cut down by a third as many poems to begin with, and then I began the process of writing Mary's story, interspersing the hard core of poems about the theatre around it.

2. Share something about your own history, about yourself as a writer.

As noted above, I considered myself first an aspiring novelist. I also tried my hand at short story writing for a while. But the awful weight of rejections discouraged me, as did full-time jobs, two babies, and several significant and time-consuming moves. It wasn't until I was in my early 40s that I returned to writing again. I owe a lot of that to my muse: my youngest son, Alex, now 14, who used to get up in the early mornings and leap from bed to write poetry, short stories, and create cartoons. Watching his joy in writing made me realize that this was something I had never wanted to lose. And since I had surrendered the idea of making my living through my writing, it made sense to go back to what I loved most, namely poetry. I was fortunate that several people during this period encouraged me to stop hiding what I was writing in the proverbial bottom drawer and told me to start reading contemporary poetry and to attend workshops and readings. I was also encouraged to start submitting again — and this time, I began to have some success. Then I met and worked intensely with Sondra Gash, whose wonderful *Silk Elegy* introduced me to the poetic narrative form. The format was a natural for me — a way to tell the stories I wanted to tell through the poetry I loved to write.

3. To what extent have you studied Shakespeare's life? I wonder, have you ever come across information about him that is not commonly known? Was it ever challenging to transfer a key moment in his life into poetic form?

I've studied Shakespeare's life extensively and with great enjoyment. I was fortunate to be able to go to London early in my research. I do sometimes wish that the Globe Theatre had already been rebuilt when I was actively doing research, as it would have been a natural place to absorb the atmosphere of the age. However, I was lucky enough to work at Radcliffe College at that time, as that gave me access to the resources at Harvard's Widener Library — a spectacular place to find some of the more esoteric material.

Yet it still astonishes me how much more there is to learn — the scholarship on Shakespeare is just so rich and multifaceted. When I was writing some of the last poems in the book, I'd often try the Internet to uncover some new gem I hadn't discovered from the various books I'd already consulted. One of the poems, "Shakerags," was inspired by just such an Internet discovery. The

poem deals with all of the possible spellings of his name — Shaxper, Shagspere, Wagespere, Waggestaff — and talks about how common a name it was. It was, after all, the name given to a foot soldier — someone who would brandish a spear. Shakespeare, who I believe wanted to be considered a gentleman, could not have been comfortable with so plebian a name.

Among the challenges I faced was to bring the Dark Lady – the mysterious love object of Shakespeare’s sonnets who scholars have tried to identify for centuries – into the book when I couldn’t name her. I resolved that by not ever having her speak — her poems are voiced by an observant and knowing servant. Yet another was having the audacity to write any poems at all in Shakespeare’s voice. After all, this is the man who has been worshipped by generations for the astonishing gift of his language, so it took a certain amount of nerve and a lot of encouragement to steel myself to speak for him. I feel fortunate that my readers, at least thus far, have perceived this as the tribute it is.

4. Will you share a poem from your book, and tell us the historical moment behind it?

One of the tragedies of Shakespeare’s personal life was losing his son, Hamnet, who was 11 years old. It seems more than likely that Hamnet died from bubonic plague. Bubonic plague was a fact of life for the Elizabethans, and when it hit London particularly hard, the theatres would be shut down, the actors head off to the provinces to tour, and Shakespeare himself might head home to Stratford to write another play.

It has been suggested that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* – for Hamlet and Hamnet were just two forms of the same name in the 16th century – as a form of catharsis. There were, certainly, several passages in Shakespeare’s plays that speak poignantly of the loss of a child, and the following poem alludes to one of these, from *Macbeth*.

Remembering Hamnet

William Shakespeare:

I remember that day by the stream,
his warm baby breath bathing
my fond fatherly face,
Hamnet laughing as we wrestled,

then his high-toned tootling
from a tiny whistle I'd carved –
shaping his sweetness
on the summer air.

“Give us your dead”
floats by tonight in London streets,
keeping time with a laden wagon
dragged past a miasma of fever,

then the dirge beyond
my neighbor's chalked door,
his cracked voice crying, *What,*
all my children? All?
All gone from me in a single night?

The church bells toll, doleful,
for him, and for me, too,
the whistle where baby lips pursed
grieving tuneless in my pocket.