



Boston Authors Club

December 2023 Newsletter

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*This month's Member Spotlight is on Peter Johnson, a widely published and award-winning prose poet, the founder and editor of international prose poetry journals and anthologies, and also the author of middle grade and young adult novels. Johnson is Professor Emeritus at Providence College, and a long-time teacher of creative writing and poetry. His recent book, *While the Undertaker Sleeps, Collected and New Prose Poems* (MadHat Press, 2023), includes a hybrid memoir of how working in the Buffalo steel mills influenced him as a writer. He received his B.A. from the State University of New York at Buffalo, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of New Hampshire. In this spotlight interview, Johnson talks about the illusion of freedom in prose poetry, his "wise fool" persona, treasured*

*feedback from young readers, and where to download a free PDF of his latest work, a book of hybrid fragments/prose poems called *Observations from the Edge of the Abyss* that will be published in the fall of 2024.*

Q: *A recent Plume essay described you as "one of America's foremost practitioners and critics of prose poetry" as well the prose poem's "unofficial Laureate." What attracted you to prose poetry originally, and what do you enjoy most about it?*

A: *I'm probably the least likely person to be a prose poet. Including high school, college, and my Ph.D., I had nine years of Latin and five of classical Greek, so I should be writing sonnets or ten-beat lines of verse. But I realized very early that I was a lousy verse poet and couldn't care less about line breaks. Right around that time I was translating the comic character sketches of the Greek philosopher*

Theophrastus, along with taking a course on Kafka, which included his short parables and aphorisms. My first prose poems were really character sketches, some of which are in *While the Undertaker Sleeps*. Also around then, someone gave me a copy of Michael Benedikt's *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*, and I was off and running. There were so many exciting voices in that anthology, and from that point on I searched for any voice or style that suited my artistic sensibility.

Also, I have always been interested in black humor, even writing a dissertation on it, and many of the poets in Benedikt's anthology, especially German writers, like Gunter Kunnert and Gunter Eich, were geniuses at using dark humor. In his last interview, Charles Simic mentioned that in terms of prose poetry, I, along with him, Russell Edson, and James Tate, were "entertainers." I know what he meant. Some critics mistake entertainment for silliness, but comedy often involves very serious subjects. For me, humor allows me to interrogate and satirize many different grand narratives and personalities. I've had some people call me the Kurt Vonnegut of the prose poem. Although I would never equate my work with Vonnegut's, I understand the comparison.

What I enjoy about the prose poem is the illusion of freedom it offers. On one hand, not being constrained by line breaks or meter, it's easier to let the unconscious roam and discover what Russell Edson called the poem's "shape of thought" or "logic of composition." But I use the expression "illusion of freedom" for a reason. Unfortunately, for many contemporary prose poets, freedom becomes an excuse for sloppiness, that is, a lack of intellectual and stylistic discipline. I founded and edited a prose poem journal for nine years, *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, and I'd say that 80% of the submissions were overwritten. Concerning free verse, T. S. Eliot said, "No verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job." That statement is even more true for prose poetry.

Q: You are also "the self-confessed wise guy of the prose poem." What does that mean in practice, and how does the wise guy manifest himself in *While the Undertaker Sleeps: Collected and New Prose Poems*?

A: Very often the "I" in my poems is a wise fool. Sometimes you can trust him, and he is very close to the "real Peter Johnson," but, at other times, you're supposed to look at him ironically. I've always been interested in the comic possibilities of the unreliable narrator. In a sense my "I" is often a guy who desperately wants to believe in the grand narratives he has lived his life by, and yet he sees how useless they often are and how people, mostly men, twist those narratives for perverse ends. That's why you constantly see the juxtaposition of the high and low in my poetry. For example, in one poem, you can find the Pope and President standing next to each other wearing "I'm with Stupid" T-shirts; or you come across a group of people who call themselves the Exclusionists but then realize that no one can join the group because they've excluded everyone from it. In this sense, you can say that I am a poster boy for postmodernism. You have to understand that when I attended a Jesuit high school, I was translating Homer during the day, then reading MAD magazine at night. In one of my favorite poems, Jesus shows up outside a Compassion Center (a fancy name for a pot shop in Rhode Island). There He meets a guy who is expecting Him to provide answers to the Great Questions of human existence, while all Jesus wants is a pair of warm socks. Now that's my kind of Jesus.

Having said all of the above, I don't want to alienate people with my humor. In fact, to me, humor is a way to bridge divides. As the poet Nicanor Parra wrote, "Humor makes contact with the reader easier. Remember, it's when you lose your sense of humor that you begin to reach for your pistol."

Q: Changing gears, you have written a number of award-winning young adult and middle grade novels over the years. What inspires your YA plots? Are there different challenges and rewards in writing fiction for young adults, compared to your prose poetry and short fiction?

A: I really miss writing in those genres. MadHat Press, my poetry publisher, published my YA novel-in-stories called SHOT in 2020, but that was only because the big houses, according to my agent, felt that the book was "too literary" for young adults. Wrap your head around that dumb comment. What I miss more than anything is going into a middle school where 300 kids (all who have read my book) are packed into an auditorium, excited to ask me the most outrageous and wonderful questions, then, afterwards, stop by to say how I changed their lives. Probably the best compliment I've ever received on any book I've written came from a high school kid attending a school for "troubled boys." He wrote me to say, "Finally a book that doesn't suck." How cool is that? At a certain point, though, I realized that I couldn't write the books I wanted to in that field anymore. Let's leave it at that because I don't like whiny writers.

Q: Do you have any new writing projects underway? If yes, please tell us about them.

A: I've become very interested in writing a hybrid form that merges the fragment, the prose poem, and the memoir with simple mundane historical facts. A perfect example of this kind of prose hybrid can be found at the end of *While the Undertaker Sleeps*. It's called "Truscon, A Division of Republic Steel, 1969-70: A Prose-Poem Sequence Disguised as a Lyrical Essay, Itself Aspiring to Be a Fictional Memoir." In it, I recount how working in the steel plants in Buffalo, NY formed me as a writer.

I've also become interested in the origins of the literary fragment and have gifted a free book of prose poems/fragments, called *Observations from the Edge of the Abyss*, which is available on my sites at <https://www.peterjohnsonauthor.com/> and which MadHat will publish in the fall of 2024. A nicely designed PDF is available for free with excerpts in the October issue of PLUME magazine at this link: <https://plumepoetry.com/fragments-from-observations-from-the-edge-of-the-abyss-by-peter-johnson/>

JANUARY'S NEWSLETTER CELEBRATES BAC AUTHORS

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IN THE JANUARY NEWSLETTER, WE'LL FEATURE YOUR RECENT AND FORTHCOMING WORKS – INCLUDING NEWS ABOUT 2024 EVENTS!

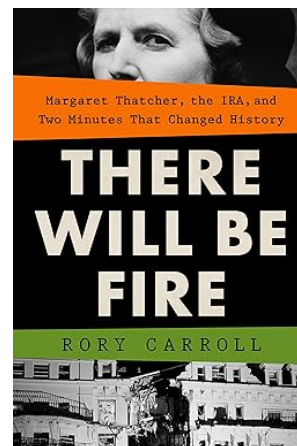
BE SURE TO SEND US YOUR NEWS by 12/27/23 to bostonauthorsclub@gmail.com

THANKS!

READING RIGHT NOW

BAC member Christopher Klein is the author of four books, including *When the Irish Invaded Canada: The Incredible True Story of the Civil War Veterans Who Fought for Ireland's Freedom* and *Strong Boy: The Life and Times of John L. Sullivan, America's First Sports Hero*. A frequent contributor to *History.com*, the website of the History Channel, he has also written for *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Harvard Magazine*, *Smithsonian.com*, and *AmericanHeritage.com*.

Chris is reading *There Will Be Fire: Margaret Thatcher, the IRA, and Two Minutes That Changed History* by Rory Carroll (Penguin Random House, 2023)



Q: What motivated you to pick up this title?

I had heard an interview with the author on a public radio show when the book came out earlier this year. Having an interest in Irish history, I was drawn in by the subject. My last book, *When the Irish Invaded Canada*, delved a bit into the origins of the IRA in the 1850s, and I can remember watching the news reports in 1984 when the IRA attempted to assassinate Margaret Thatcher by detonating a bomb in a hotel in the English seaside resort of Brighton where she had been attending the Conservative Party conference. Thatcher escaped injury, although she could have been killed if the bomb had exploded just minutes earlier when she was in her suite's bathroom. Five other people, unfortunately, died in the explosion that collapsed a section of the hotel.

Q: Would you recommend it to friends? Why or why not?

I highly recommend it! Carroll's book opens five years before the deadly blast with the IRA's assassination of Lord Mountbatten on the same day they kill 18 British soldiers just months after Margaret Thatcher's election as prime minister. The book goes behind the doors of Downing Street as Thatcher takes a hard line against the IRA and becomes a target herself after Bobby Sands and other IRA hunger strikers die in British prisons. Unleashing a series of bombs that explode in London in the 1980s, the IRA then launches an operation to kill Thatcher herself. Even for those who usually shy away from

nonfiction, this book reads like a thriller as Carroll details the IRA operation to plant the timed bomb without detection and the massive manhunt that occurs in the weeks following the blast to locate the IRA bomber before he could strike again. Carroll has interviewed scores and scores of people—including the bomber himself—in researching the book, and it shows in the rich details that give this book its fast-paced edge. There's even a bit of a Boston connection in the book with a cameo by Whitey Bulger, who shipped arms to the IRA in early 1980s.

Interview by Mary J Cronin



PRESIDENTS MUSINGS

The Tactility of Books

E- books are on the rise. A recent *New York Times* article suggested increasing numbers of libraries are using apps like Libby, SimplyE and cloudLibrary to enable their patrons to take out books virtually. The Internet Archive contains millions of books among its holdings; the Library of Congress has put thousands of the books from its massive collection online. E- book sales in the United States continue to grow, estimated to reach \$83 million dollars in revenue this year, alone.

Clearly, the wider electronic dissemination of books is a good thing. At least in theory, it makes more books more accessible. It was a necessity during the pandemic. And just as people first thought and wrote of the internet, electronic book dissemination might mean more democratization – more books for more people, available more inexpensively.

Call me old-fashioned, but I still like reading paper books. It's not just that my middle-aged eyes increasingly need my glasses to read on screens. I like holding books. I like the feeling of running my finger against their spines, and I like the sensation of gently turning their pages. And who can forget that incredible quote from Neil Gaiman, "A book is a dream that you hold in your hands." How true! There is something about a corporeal book that is the physical link to the fantasies their contents can provide for us. And at least for me, that's something I never want to relinquish, no matter how much I think e-books are a good idea.

Wishing you all a lovely and meaningful Thanksgiving holiday with family and friends.

Julie Dobrow
BAC President

Yesteryear: Josiah Benton's Lasting Legacy

" In the name of the Government & people of said state you are hereby Required forthwith to warn Jacob Benton & Hannah his wife, Mabel, Jacob, Reynold, Mary & Samuel Benton, their children to Depart out of this Town Immediately & no longer make it the place of their Residence under the pains that will follow. Hereof fail not & make Return of this warrant with your doings thereon as soon as may be... "

The Jacob Benton named in this notice was my great-grandfather, and the Samuel, who was then about five years old, was my grandfather."



Thus starts a book by Boston Authors Club member Josiah Henry Benton, Jr. (1844-1917), pictured above. The book, *Warning Out in New England*, was published in 1911 by W.B. Clarke. The town that Jacob and his family were ordered to depart on April 7, 1783, was Alstead, New Hampshire. Despite this stern farewell from Alstead, Benton assures us, "My great-grandfather was a good soldier, a devout Christian, and a peaceable citizen." He goes on to list three more expulsions of equally upstanding citizens and then asks rhetorically, "What was the reason for this apparently extraordinary and unjust treatment of these persons?"

This is as sweet an introductory hook to a non-fiction book---and a law book at that---that I think I've ever encountered.

Josiah Benton studied at Albany Law School and Dartmouth, then practiced law in Vermont and New Hampshire before moving his practice to Boston in 1873. In addition to being a very successful lawyer, Benton became well known as an avid collector, a lover of literature, and a generous lifelong supporter of the Boston Public Library. He became a trustee of the BPL in 1894 and was president of the Board from 1908 until 1917. According to our BAC historian emeritus, Mildred Buchanan Flagg, Benton visited the library daily.

During his life, he donated \$100,000 to the BPL to be used to endow a Children's Fund for the acquisition of books for young readers. In his will, he bequeathed over a million dollars to the BPL for building and expansion, as well as bequeathing his considerable private collection of editions of the Book of Common Prayer. Of this collection, the BPL website notes, "The Benton Collection of Editions of the Book of Common Prayer is one of the most extensive existing collections of its kind..." Benton's original collection of 658 volumes has grown to over 1,500 volumes today.

Josiah Henry Benton joined the Boston Authors Club in 1915. A number of Benton's monographs are available on the Internet Archive, including *Warning Out, Early Census Making in Massachusetts 1643-1765 with a Reproduction of the Lost Census of 1765*, and *A Notable Libel Case: The Criminal Prosecution of Theodore Lyman Jr. by Daniel Webster*. Also on the Internet Archive is the catalog for the auction of "The Notable Autograph Collection of the Late Josiah Henry Benton." The auction was held at the BPL on March 6, 1920, and the catalog is 272 pages long.

Collecting autographs is a hobby that has gone out of vogue, perhaps because people write fewer longhand letters these days and collecting "sigs" on e-mails isn't quite the same. The catalog entry for many of the autographs includes a snippet from the letter on which the autograph appears. For example, Lot 918 is Noah Webster's signature on a letter to his publisher. The snippet is

"Please to make the following corrections in the Spelling Books— . . . Wolga is German Spelling, & in German W is pronounced V & Volga is the true name of the river. ..."

Lot 438 is the autograph of our own Julia Ward Howe that appeared on a January 2, 1903, letter to Mr. J. H. Benton, Jr. The letter refers to "...a letter which I have written to Countess Yampini Valazar, expressive of my good opinion of her magazine, the *Italian Review*."

Unfortunately, the catalog is a clean copy and not one annotated by somebody at the auction who scribbled winning bids in the margins.

As it turns out, Benton doesn't ever explain why his relatives were warned out of Alstead, but after reading his monograph, I have a conjecture. In many towns with warning out laws on the books, one had to have the permission of the selectmen to rent a house to "strangers," who were defined as any persons who had not been granted residency in the town. It may have been that Jacob rented a house in Alstead for which its owner had not received this permission, and therefore, the warning out was due to the owner's failure rather than with anything to do with the Bentons.

To the extent that his ancestor's inglorious departure from New Hampshire may have motivated Josiah Benton to embrace life in Boston and endow the BPL so generously, today's BAC members and our neighbors owe Alstead a thank you.

By Scott B Guthery

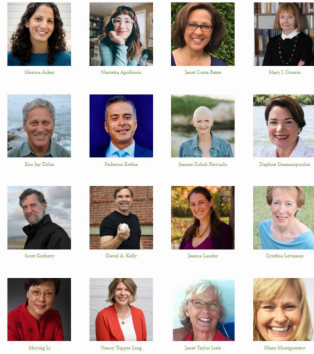


The January 2024 Newsletter will feature news, publications, and commentary by BAC authors!
Send your news and contributions by 12/27/23 to
bostonauthorsclub@gmail.com

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