



**Our Interview with Poet
Christopher Madden**



*Whimsy, surrealism, and leaps of thought
fit well into poetry!*

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Hi Christopher! Thanks for joining us today! I'm so happy to be interviewing you! You were in my Fairfield University MFA in Creative Writing graduating class, and now you are a great friend of the Norwalk Public Library. We just seem to keep meeting!

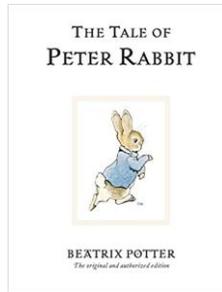
I know in graduate school you had been writing a piece on Bigfoot. Was that fiction, or nonfiction? I don't think you were focusing on poetry in graduate school. Am I correct?

Christopher: The Bigfoot writing was a little of both. I was working on a novel – *The Saugatuck Bigfoot Research Center* -- which started as a straight up parody of Bigfoot mania. But I became more interested in the people who believe in Bigfoot. I spent one semester writing nonfiction, and went on several Bigfoot searches in Arkansas and Ohio with seekers and believers. I also interviewed a few proprietors of Bigfoot museums. It was not what I expected. I took one poetry workshop my last week in grad school.

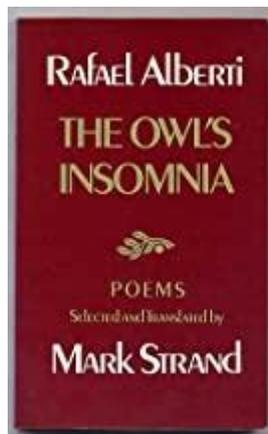


Sally: At what point in your life did you begin writing poetry? Had you always loved poetry from childhood on, or did that come later in life for you?

Christopher: Like many kids of my era, I got hooked on nursery rhymes and then it progressed. Beatrix Potter was a gateway drug that lead to Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein.



I started writing poetry as an undergrad. One of my earliest poems, “Buses Run Every Day,” was published in 1986 when I was a first-year college student. Whimsy, surrealism, and leaps of thought fit well into poetry. A poetry collection that amazed me as an undergrad was Rafael Alberti’s, *The Owl’s Insomnia*. I had the great fortune of working with poets Kelly Cherry and Dean Young when I was an undergrad at the University of Wisconsin. Fiction won out temporarily, but the poetry always stuck around.



A poetry collection that amazed me!

Sally: I always like to know who a poet’s favorite poets are. It is interesting because often one can see the influence in the work. Certainly, one can see a kindred sensibility. Who are yours? What are a few of your favorite poems? What makes them favorites?

Christopher: This changes frequently. James Tate’s anti-poetry is fascinating because it is surreal, and breaks every rule that one can think of. “The All But Perfect Evening by the Lake” is a good example. I had the

great fortune of seeing Tracy K. Smith, the former poet laureate in Norwalk a few years ago. Her collection, *Life on Mars*, is a must-read. I am not a spoken-word performer, but I admire some of the poets that can do it well. Danez Smith can captivate an audience, but the work on the page is also remarkable. “Dinosaurs in the Hood” comes to mind. I am new to Joy Harjo, the current poet laureate of the United States, but her work continues to surprise me.

Sally: You recently founded the publishing company, Woodhall Press. It’s amazingly successful for being so new. Please tell us how this came about! What was the original idea? How did you make the dream become a reality? How do you select your authors? Which genres do you publish? What does its name, Woodhall, refer to?

Christopher: “Woodhall Press” sounded sturdy. Plus, books are still made of wood—mostly. At least for now. Our first publication, *Mentoring Teenage Heroes*, features nonfiction case-studies, and essays about Joseph Campbell’s monomyth. It doesn’t fit neatly into one section of the bookshelf. So we made a press for it.



We publish fiction, essays, flash nonfiction collections, and have done two children’s books. *Oysterville: Poems* is a poetry chapbook featuring Norwalk poets. Our latest book is from former Maine Poet Laureate, Baron Wormser: *Songs From a Voice*. It’s a novel that has quatrains embedded in between sections, and that is otherwise chapterless. Like our first publication, it fits into our ethos of publishing essential books that don’t necessarily behave as books should. In the dirty business of book sales, yes, our books are available nationally from the big sites, but why not support your local bookstore? There is more info at www.woodhallpress.com.

I know you recently gave a **FUMFA** (Fairfield University MFA) reading live on facebook. Can you tell us a little about that? Can anyone tune in to watch these readings, and is a recording of them available afterwards?

Christopher: *FUMFA Poets & Writers Live* is a facebook page which is open to the public. There are weekly readings on Sunday evenings featuring alum of the Fairfield University MFA, and other MFA-adjacent writers. It is a great series, and they archive the previous readings so you can still watch them even if you can't tune in live.

Sally: It's really admirable, Christopher, how you support the arts, and help other writers develop, and achieve recognition through your publishing company, **Woodhall Press**, and **BRAG**. This must take a lot of energy! How do you fit in your own writing? Does your public work conflict with your own private work as poet? Or perhaps— as is sometimes the case— it fuels it?

Christopher: A good example is “My Heart is a Red Red Bird Just Beyond the Reach of My Fingertips,” inspired by BRAG artist Sheila Weaver's painting *A Mother's Roots*. The poem and painting were created for a canceled April Ekphrasis show. The poem started off about one thing, and then changed once COVID-19 locked down the country. Editing and publishing and organizing events takes time and psychic energy, but it almost always gives back. Gosh I miss live readings so very much.

Sally: Yes, I know. We had a poetry open mic scheduled at the library just before we closed. Everyone was looking forward to it.

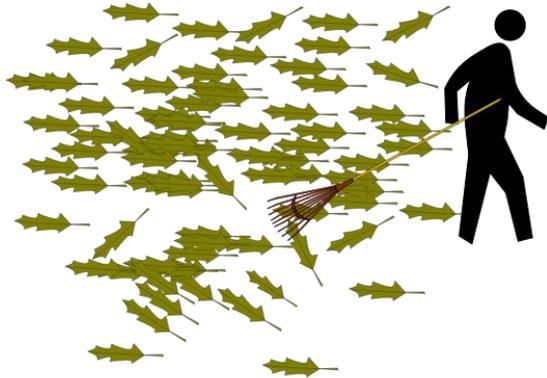
What about your own publishing? Do you publish poems in journals? Do you have a book of your own brewing?

Christopher: I've had poems published in a few small journals, and a few stories. I write regularly, and am working on a new novel. I ignore my own advice about sending out work. Getting published is a bonus, of course, but writing and creating is its own end.

Sally: Absolutely. I always say that publishing is secondary. What really matters is the work; the genuine, true work.

What's Christopher Madden like behind all this success? Do you garden, and read?

Christopher: My wife is the visionary force behind our lovely gardens, so I do a lot of the raking and dump runs. Our house was severely damaged by a massive tree that fell last fall, and the reconstruction was finished in late April. I spend a lot of time over-thinking which paintings to re-hang because I suppose I'm reluctant to mar the tabula rasa of freshly painted walls. Consequently, I've bumped my knee on the same painting three different times. Once more and I'll



have to put it up, or write a poem.

Now, a selection of Christopher's poems!...

Cubical

In my old office a
coworker called home
at least twice a day
to sing to her dog
in her operatic voice.

Who were we to
interfere with the
joyful noise of belting out
showtunes and sea shanties
to an answering machine?

It was distracting, odd,
and maddeningly disruptive,
but funny, also, until
two humorless cops enforced
the restraining order.

Only then, her makeup
a stream, her *joie-de-vivre*
handcuffed behind her back,
did we learn that the
“Ex” owned the dog.

It was if her front wheel
suddenly stopped
and she went soaring
over the handlebars
into quiet.

Christopher Madden

A version of this poem appeared in *Temenos Literary Journal*.

My Heart is a Red Red Bird Just Beyond My Fingertips

After the Painting “A Mother’s Roots” by Sheila Weaver, and Tennessee Williams

My heart is
a red red bird
I Cool myself
in the jet streams
of its pterodactyl
wings

My head is
red vines of ivy
tethering me
with reason,
keeping me
grounded

But my heart is
a red red bird,
Pied-piper me,
just beyond
the reach
of my fingertips

Won’t you alight
on my ungloved hands?
Kiss my cheeks,
so I can feel
warmth
on my face?

Oh red red bird,
I am not alone
there are door knobs
to clean
surfaces to sanitize
air to air out

I am a crime

show antagonist,
a methodical
TV villain
obliterating
 DNA

Each fingerprint
 is unique

Each fingerprint is
 a poem

Each fingerprint is
 a labyrinth
 daring us to try and take flight

Each fingerprint
 is Cloroxed

By day I am
Howard Hughes,
Scrubbing my hands
 raw

By night, I am
Lady Scottish Play
washing my hands
 in my sleep
in advance of
 tomorrow
 and tomorrow
 and tomorrow

Head says stay inside
but my heart is
a red red bird
just beyond
the reach
 of my fingertips

Land, red red bird,
unfetter me

Open the cage door
red red bird
I am unafraid

Whisper to me about the rain
red red bird
I promise I'll stand
six feet away

Talk to me like the rain
red red bird
Even the statues
in my garden
wear KN-95s

Sing to me like the rain
red red bird
I will stretch
my ears
and listen

Christopher Madden



A Mother's Roots

Sheila Weaver

Five Poems: Long Titles, Short Poems

**Driving to the All-Nite Laundromat in New Hampshire to Wash the Heavy Bedding
in one of Those Industrial Machines the size of a Mercury Space Capsule**

I saw
A bear
Cross Route 113

**Noticing the Sky after Driving Far Enough Away from the City to Outrun the Long
Arms of Light Pollution**

My God,
it's full
of stars

**In the Dream My Many-gabled Mansion has Babel-sized towers, Hand Carved Trim
and Columns, and None of it Ever Needs Painting**

I
awake
with
brush
in hand

**If I tell You the Mountains are Part of the Sky, Will You Climb Their Reflection in
the Lake with Me?**

Same
time
tomorrow?

**That Time a Tree Came Through Our Bedroom Ceiling at Midnight and We Awoke
Under Plaster Dust that Made Us Resemble Ghosts**

Ended my
contemplation
about trees
falling in the
the forest &
the ensuing
noise

Christopher Madden

Thank you, Christopher Madden!

