



Our Interview with Poet Mark Lamoureux



**...words define and color our lives.
The beginning of speech is the beginning of memory,
and the world becomes known to us as we name it.**

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Thanks for joining us today on the **Poetry Page**, Mark! You—along with Katherine E. Schneider and Van Hartmann—were featured on our very first Poetry Page early on in the pandemic. I wrote that Page because the three of you were scheduled to appear for an **AuthorSpeak** program at the library that we had to postpone because of COVID.

Since the Poetry Page had not yet evolved at that time into this interview format, we didn't learn a lot about you! That's why I've invited you back!

You were also an exhibited poet in our 2019 **Art and Text** exhibit at the library with your poem "Jade Visions."

Let's start with the role poetry plays in your daily life! I don't mean the physical act of writing, but rather—I should ask—how do you carry poetry within you as you go through life?

Mark: First off, thank you so much for inviting me to do this again and for the work that you do for poets at the **Norwalk Public Library** through the **Poetry Page**, and other endeavors.

This is a great and important question! The practice of poetry is definitely a relationship to language and to the world that is always ongoing, regardless of whether one is actively composing or writing.

I don't even mean that it's a process of always listening and picking up turns of phrases or lines, though it includes that, certainly.

To be "a poet" is to understand the ways that words define and color our lives. The beginning of speech is the beginning of memory, and the world becomes known to us as we name it.

This isn't to say that this is a rarefied or "special" characteristic possessed by certain people—we **all** possess it; the issue is whether we choose to acknowledge or think about it. Once one chooses to acknowledge and think about it, one is a poet.

Sally: That's marvelous, Mark, "...and the world becomes known to us as we name it."

Did you always love poetry?

Did you read and write poetry as a child?

Mark: As a kid, I loved “singing,” composing songs and singing them into a tape recorder. “Poetry” wasn’t really something that my parents thought about or engaged with, but insofar as this “singing” was actually poetry, it was definitely something I liked and was interested in. I was interested in books and writing. It wasn’t until I was introduced to the idea of poetry at school that I really began to write what I identified internally as poetry.

Around the time my parents got divorced, puberty hit, and along with it came depression, and then poetry was a way of coping with that.

Sally: Is there a particular person you remember who introduced you to poetry, or language, or books?

Mark: My mother definitely bought me a lot of children’s books when I was young.

When I got older, I discovered the experience of reading myself through comic books, and related media like fantasy and science fiction novels and role-playing games.

My high-school English teachers were the ones who really got me invested in poetry and “literature,” specifically. I actually had a computer teacher, Roger Leege, who was a painter and a photographer, who had gone to Goddard College in the ‘60s, who introduced me to the counterculture and the Beats, and lent me [Richard Brautigan](#) books, and others. That is probably where things really began in earnest for me. My experience of poetry has always been countercultural.

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Richard Brautigan's

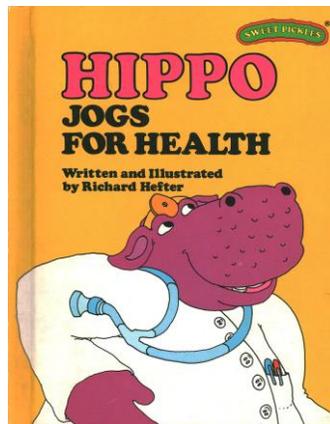
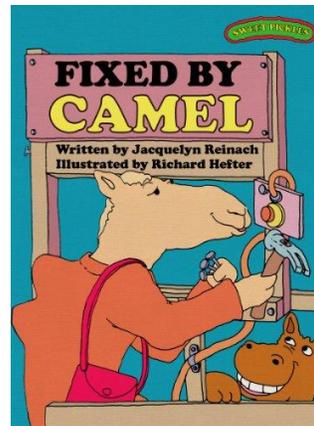
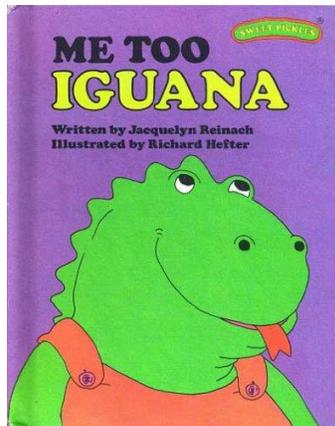


Trout Fishing in America,
The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster,
and In Watermelon Sugar.
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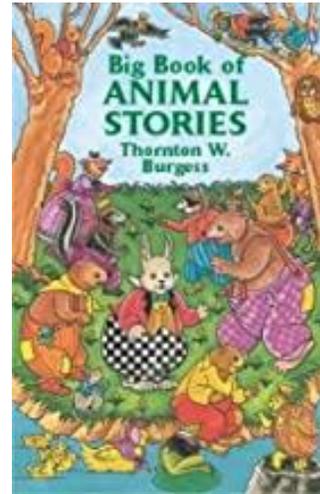
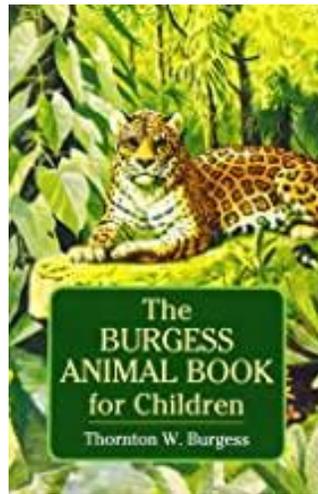
I also think a lot of music I was listening to at that time, mostly punk and post-punk—The Cure, Bauhaus, R.E.M. and others— had a big impact on me as a writer.

Sally: As a child, what were your favorite books, and poems, and poets?

Mark: Like most kids, I liked **Dr. Seuss** and **Richard Scary**, also a series called *Sweet Pickles* that I don't think is around anymore.

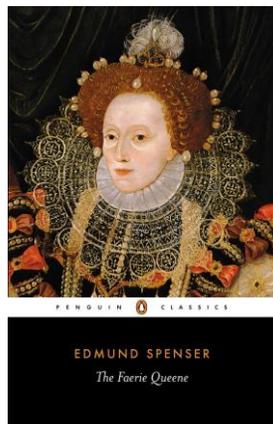


As I got older, I became really interested in the children's nature writer, [Thornton W. Burgess](#)—sadly, these works haven't really aged well, but I really didn't start reading poetry until high school.



Sally: I know you have a little girl. Do you read poetry aloud to her?

Mark: Oh yes, all the time. When she was an infant, I liked to read [Spenser's "The Faerie Queene"](#) to her.



Now that she is older, she prefers her own books, but most children's books are informed by poetry in one way or another, even if it's just by way of brevity or rhyme and meter. I sometimes read her my work, but she gets bored pretty quickly.

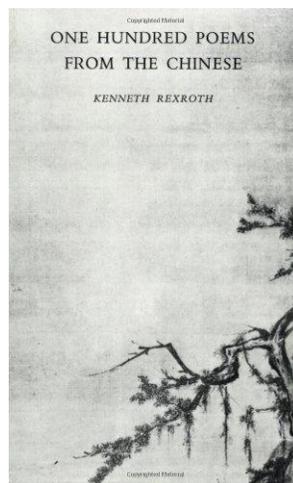
Sally: How important do you feel it is to instill a love of poetry in children?

Mark: I think it's extremely important.

Before the pandemic, I participated in [Michael Rothenberg's 100 Thousand Poets for Change](#) organization's annual **Read a Poem to a Child** event every year at my daughter's day care. People typically have this fear of poetry, and it is mostly the fear of the unknown—if children become acquainted with poetry earlier, perhaps they won't have the fear. I wish I had become aware of poetry earlier in my life.

Sally: Do you have a particular poem that at one point struck you so deeply—either in your childhood or adulthood—that it made you realize you were a poet?

Mark: There were a lot of these. In high school, there was T.S. Eliot's "[The Hollow Men](#)," and in college there were [Kenneth Rexroth](#)'s translations of Su Tung Po and other classical Chinese poets, and Wallace Stevens' "[A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts](#)." If you look at my work now, you probably won't find many traces of these poets, except perhaps Stevens, but they were important to my development.

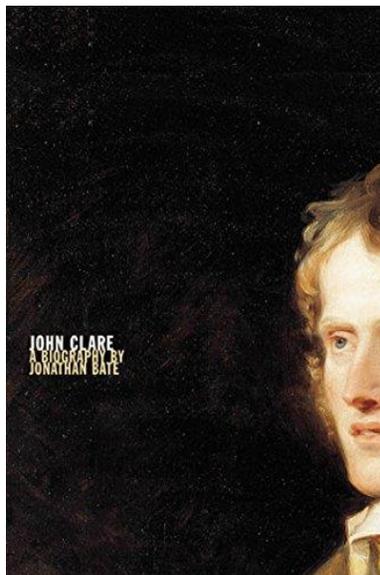


Sally: I know you like the poet [John Clare](#). When I included a poem of his in a posting, you responded, "John Clare! Woot! Woot!" Are you fond of the Romantics? Please share a little about your thoughts on John Clare!!

Mark: I am a big fan of [Blake](#) and the second wave of Romantic poets, [Shelley](#), [Byron](#), and [Keats](#). You'd probably have trouble finding a poet who isn't fond of Keats. I think I have the same problems with the first-generation Romantics' abandonment of political radicalism that the second wave did!

[John Clare](#) was the beginning of the fad of "peasant poets" during the Romantic era, who were poets from the laboring class without any formal training. He typically wrote on rural themes, and the minutiae of life as an agricultural worker in the English countryside, which was unusual for the time. He wrote almost exclusively in the sonnet form and knew his way around a sonnet like no one else. I don't think anyone since Shakespeare had learned to operate as intimately and intuitively with the form as Clare did. He also struggled with neurological difference, and I think there's something in the poems that resonates with me.

Sally: Yes, Keats and Clare were writing and publishing at the same time, and had the same publisher: the very dedicated John Taylor. Clare sold many more books than Keats during his lifetime, though his initial success dropped off quite early. I think Clare's life is fascinating, and also tragic. Not many know of him today like they know of Keats. I don't know why he isn't often taught along with Keats, Shelley, and Byron. He was right among them!

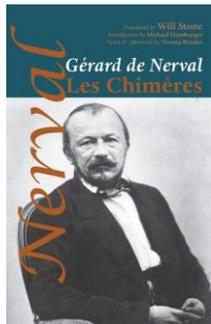


John Clare, by Jonathan Bate

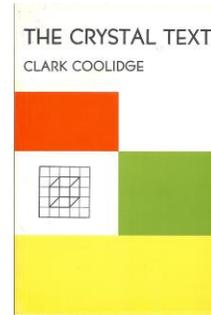
Currently, who are your favorite poets. What are a few of your favorite poems? Why?

Mark: I've always had a hard time answering this question; typically my favorite poets are my friends—because they're my friends! I feel like I read pretty extensively and find things that I like in a pretty vast array of different work. Recently, I've been reading a lot of [Francois Villon](#) in translation and appreciating his dark sense of humor.

Poems that I often come back to are [Gerard de Nerval's](#) *Les Chimères*, which I like so much I translated it myself, [Ronald Johnson's](#) *Ark*, [James Thomson's](#) "[The City of Dreadful Night](#)," [Bernadette Mayer's](#) "Midwinter Day," Clark Coolidge's *Crystal Text*, and [Alice Notley's](#) "[The Decent of Alette](#)."



ARK



I feel like literary presses and magazines are a bit like record labels, in that they sort of curate the stuff that they publish; right now my favorite presses are [White Stag Publishing](#), [Vegetarian Alcoholic Press](#), [Resurrection Magazine](#), [Yes Poetry](#) and [Luna Luna Magazine](#). Interestingly, most of these publications are run by women.

Sally: You are a professor at [Housatonic Community College](#). What courses do you teach?

Mark: I teach Freshman Composition, Introduction to Literature, Creative Writing, and British Literature (when the course fills enough to run, which isn't very often).

Sally: That's too bad about the unpopularity of British Literature!

Please share with us what inspired you to become a teacher?

Mark: Every poet knows that it simply isn't possible to exist in the world of industrial capitalism by writing poetry alone. Our society doesn't value labor put into artwork that doesn't "sell" commodities—be they books, recordings, or what have you. So, I needed to determine something to do with my labor that I'd be compensated for, but I wanted my labor to do something else besides just oiling the machinery of industrial capitalism, so I felt teaching was a way to give back to the community while at the same time being compensated enough for my labor to eat and have a roof over my head and raise a family.

Additionally, when I think back on my many teachers, especially the ones from high school, they sort of saved my life, so it seemed like an opportunity to positively impact another young person in the same way. I don't know if I've actually done this, but I hope I have.

Personally, I'm not really suited to the nine to five schedule or environment, so an academic schedule was the obvious choice. I also really enjoy teaching, so that was important, too.

Sally: Do you feel you can "teach" writing? How do you approach this?

Mark: You can absolutely teach writing. Everyone can write; teaching writing is simply a matter of assessing an author's goals with a piece, and helping them to reach those goals.

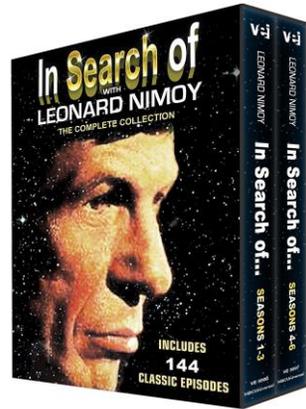
Sally: Please share with us your educational background. I assume you have formal training in poetry?

Mark: I went to undergrad at the now sadly defunct [Marlboro College](#), majoring in poetry and photography, and I got my MFA in poetry from [The New School](#). I didn't get my MFA until I was well into my 30s, though.

Sally: Would you say you have certain preoccupations as poet that surface in your work? I believe a poet's authentic poems reveal things to the poet. Do you feel this way?

Mark: Absolutely; poems reveal many things, sometimes even in an almost paranormal sense. For instance, I would write about having a daughter long before my daughter was ever born. I never wrote about having a son, so it seemed almost inevitable that I would have a daughter.

In terms of preoccupations, I have so many, and they are all strange. My last big project was writing poems to the old Leonard Nimoy paranormal reality program *In Search of...* from the late '70s. (I say “to” instead of “about” because I just watched the shows, and mined images and phrases from them, without their having any direct narrative correlation, necessarily, to what was going on in the show itself.)



I also wrote a book about the Northern Soul subculture in the UK, which was a dance culture focused on obscure US soul musicians, drawing from songs and research about the artists' lives. It was an interesting moment in time, where you had these working-class British kids idolizing and communicating with these artists of color in the US. Like the *In Search of...* projects, these poems are more “to” the source material than “about” it.

I draw a lot from what one might call “pop culture” in my work, particularly music—mainly punk, metal, Goth and jazz; and also the “nerd” culture of my youth—Dungeons & Dragons, science fiction, anime, cartoons. I consider myself to be a Pop artist in the tradition of Andy Warhol, and others.

Sally: As far as the physical act of writing goes as a poet, do you write on a set schedule? Or do you write when inspired? Please share with us how this all works for you!

Mark: I don't really write on a set schedule. Especially right now, as a parent in the time of the pandemic working from home with my daughter often at home, too. Like Emily Dickinson, I'm only able to jot quick things down in the midst of domestic labor. Prior to the pandemic, I didn't really write on a set schedule either, though.

I suppose you might say that I write when I'm "inspired," though I am somewhat critical or skeptical of that term. I like to move away from the Wordsworthian definition of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," because I feel like it imposes a lot of limitations.

I might feel like writing a poem about donuts because I like donuts, but I'm not sure those would be considered "powerful feelings," per se. I might have a turn of phrase floating around in my head for a while and then work it into a poem, or I might decide to write "about" something. Generally speaking, the spontaneous, improvisational writing tends to be more successful than the intentional "about" writing, but it does work sometimes.

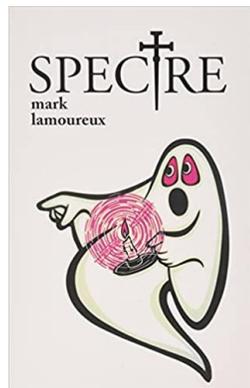
Sally: You have been very prolific! You have five full-length collections of poetry. That is quite an accomplishment. Please tell us about these books, and how they came into being. Your most recent—[*Horologion*](#)—was published just last year!



Mark: These all came about by way of relationships I had with people in the writing community.

In 2009 or so, a number of other poets and I started [Black Radish Books](#), which is a publishing cooperative, where a bunch of us got together and decided to start a press for work that might not be “publishable” in other contexts. There were thirteen of us in the beginning and we published books by all thirteen of us, and then started publishing works by people not in the collective.

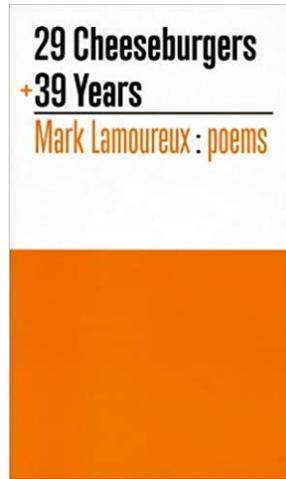
Later, we went and did another round of books by the original thirteen. This is how I published [Spectre](#), and [It'll Never Be Over for Me](#) (the Northern Soul book I mentioned earlier).



[Black Radish Books](#) is still going, but it's slowed down a lot since the driving force behind it, and the person who sort of kept us organized— the poet [Marthe Reed](#)— died in 2018.

29 Cheeseburgers + 39 Years was published by [William Corbett](#)'s **Pressed Wafer**. One of my first publications was a chapbook, *29 Cheeseburgers*, that Bill published on **Pressed Wafer**. It proved to be a big seller for **Pressed Wafer**, probably because [Grolier Poetry Bookshop](#), located right next to the famous burger joint in Harvard Square, [Mr. Bartley's](#), used to keep it in their window, and people going to Mr. Bartley's would buy it as a souvenir.

When the chapbook sold out, Bill asked me if I wanted to do a full-length reprint with other works, so the 39 Years section was added—a poem for each year of my life at that time. Bill also died in 2018, so **Pressed Wafer** is no more.



Horologion was a runner-up for a manuscript contest held by [Ping-Pong Free Press](#), publishing arm of the **Henry Miller Memorial Library**. [Maria Teutsch](#), the director at that time, said that while it wouldn't be published by Ping-Pong, she was starting her own press, and asked if I would I be interested in doing the book with her. Of course, I said yes.

Sally: How do you know, personally, when a book is ready to be published?

Mark: It's hard to determine. Sometimes, I arbitrarily stop working on something when I get bored of it. With most manuscripts, I just keep working on them until they get published; once you publish them, then you have to stop working on them!

Sally: How do you, personally, choose a publisher for your books?

Mark: I send the manuscripts out until a publisher decides to publish them. This generally involves sending out to a lot of publishers. I tell beginning poets that it's a numbers game—you just keep submitting until eventually someone will be interested. If no one is interested, you self-publish.

Of course, there are a lot of publishers these days, so I generally send work to places who have published my friends or people whose work I enjoy.

Sally: Do you publish frequently in journals? Do you always have submissions out there?

Mark: I used to publish a lot more frequently in journals when I was younger, and before I became a father. I had a pretty detailed spreadsheet of where I had sent poems to, when I sent them, where I would send them next, and so forth, so the work was always in circulation.

I don't really do that anymore. Now I just send work if someone asks me for it, or if I see a journal that I like or that has published work by friends whose work I like.

Sally: How important is publishing to you?

Mark: This is question that all writers grapple with eventually, and one for which the answer has changed considerably. Once upon a time, in print-only culture, the barriers to entry for publishing were much greater, and you pretty much needed to publish in magazines to have any hope of publishing a book at all. Self-publishing was costly, and generally looked down on as an act of vanity. People placed great faith in literary tastemakers and gatekeepers.

With the rise of the Internet and increasingly high-quality Print on Demand technology, there are far fewer barriers to entry for publishing. With social media platforms, you can reach a lot of people just on your own without the need for a publisher or a journal. The Instagram poetry community is vast; it's often derided by people used to the old publishing models, but I think it's great. During the pandemic I started an Instagram poetry project, and the reach of the platform is astonishing. One of my poems was reposted by a poet in Myanmar currently engaged in protesting the military junta. I don't think any of the other places I've published work would have made it into the screens of Burmese revolutionaries. So don't underestimate or stigmatize social media as a medium.

So, I'd say publishing is important, but the publishing industry is less and less so. Don't wait for someone else's approval. Just publish what you write in whatever way you can, and see where it takes you!

Sally: That's great advice. Is there any other advice that would you give writers on publishing?

Mark: Send stuff to journals and presses run by people you know. If you don't know anyone, meet some people. Join forums, social media groups, comment on poetry online, whatever it takes to forge personal relationships with people. The most important thing for a writer is to build a community. Don't worry about publishing in the "big" or "important" venues, because chances are it won't happen.

Also, publish other people—start your own journal or press. You can do this almost for free these days with Print on Demand and publishing on the Web. The community of literature is more transactional than you think. Do things for other people, and they will do things for you. If you wait around for a patron to discover your genius, you might be waiting a long time.

Sally: Please share with us what you enjoy outside of poetry? Gardening, reading, hiking, family?

Mark: I think reading is something that every writer enjoys. I do have a garden, but I'm not sure what I do with it would be considered "gardening," so much as just planting things and hoping for the best. I have a record collection, so I guess you could say that is a hobby of mine outside of writing. Of course, I spend a lot of time with my family, especially during the pandemic.

Sally: Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

Mark: I just want to implore people to support their local arts organizations and libraries, which obviously have been struggling during the pandemic. Also, please investigate small presses and journals; read beyond the *New Yorker* and the *Paris Review* and the things being published by the "big" publishers. Support local writers and local publishers and local venues. Give books as gifts, post poems on social media—when we are able to again, take a date to a reading instead of a movie or a play or whatever—they're usually free so you can spend more on dinner!

Sally: Wonderful!!

Thanks so much for joining us on the **Poetry Page**, Mark!



Now, three of Mark's poems...

Walking Up

after Bill Evans

Walking up the stairs
of the ziggurat
flanked by violet shadows
of soap bubbles--

the black jackrabbit
cuts the cards:
kings of hearts
for some, spades & deuces
& hummingbird wings for others, spidersilk
veils for the queen
of the amaranth.

Boundless existence as trees' perception of time; not seen but felt
a cell at a time—senseless—but sound can be felt as vibrations
& light, a chemical reaction or pain, which is universal. Negation is
the most powerful force; music is a momentary disruption
of the symmetry of silence. Life is chaos & chaos is life,
stepping in time with its own negation.

Walking up under the
clouds in movies, immortal
as the sky seen as blue
in the stream that flows over
the steps, digging
a groove in the monolith
of human existence, seen
as events in time, seen
as music.

Mark Lamoureux

Very Early

after Bill Evans

Very early the yard is free
of people & their germs

Very early the mockingbirds
have nobody to mock so

Very early the mockingbirds sing
their own songs

Very early the pink sky is full
of airships & their paperboys

Very early the leaves of the papers
fan like wings &

Very early the ink smudges
on the steps with crumbling corners

Very early like collapsing bricks
of parmesan cheese.

Time opens like a zipper on the redolent body
of the past, which expands into knowing as the present
grinds into the thin line that is the future.
Each day opens the teeth of its mouth for the song
of becoming. We can only look back; looking forward
we only stare into the thin line
of our imagination.

Very early morning glories open
before the eyes of people

Very early the lamenting body
will rise

Very early from sleep
as clouds light from emptinesses

Very early to shapes; the mirrors
of the dew prism rainbows

Very early on the uncurling ziggurats
of the irises;

Very early the remnants of the rain
shiver with the

Very early steps of bumble bees
in search of

Very early foxglove gloves
very early in the quiet

Very early morning
very early

Very early

Mark Lamoureaux

In Search of Haunted Castles

Some swear in English Meadows, the scariest
spirits of all. So many people.
Ghosts have a tendency, Leonard
has a tweed jacket. One doesn't know
the horse on the stairs. Leonard
cradles the graves. Something horrible
has close bangs. Horrifying pancake
makeup in our next dramatization.
Thick with bluebells & quite drunk,
sinister floor toms. The younger people
arising from the pond. A screaming skull
in quivering zoom that I heard
from my room. Television films,
white & trembling, standing in the corner.
Particularly good & particularly typical.
A dark pillar fills the screen
& goes away. The explanation
is torn away, somehow frozen, a great loss.

Mark Lamoureaux

