



W. T. Pfefferle. *Poets on Place: Interviews and Tales from the Road.* Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005. xvii + 294 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87421-597-7.



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What's Place Got To Do With It? American Poets Talk About Where They Live

I started reading *Poets on Place* at my home in a town just south of San Francisco, but the bulk of it got read during a week in Mexico, at a beachside “eco-resort.” As vacation reading and companion of relaxed hours in a beautiful place, I found it quite entertaining, even amusing, a sort of *Frommer’s Guide to American Poets and the Places They Live In and Love*.

At the same time, it’s a book with a serious purpose. As Pfefferle writes in his introduction, “I wanted to know what other writers thought of [place]. How did their work spring from the places of their lives?” (p. xvii). Over a nine-month period, Pfefferle interviewed sixty-one poets, ranging from well-known, long-established writers such as Marvin Bell, Rita Dove, David Lehman, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Mark Strand to lesser-known rising stars or people who have a solid body of work but have not seen much public attention. He asked them serious questions, such as how their relationship to the places where they have lived has impacted their poetry, and whether they believe they have an obligation to write about those places. The answers are wildly varied, not surprising given the composition of the group: from very

old to very young, living in every kind of landscape (urban, rural, and suburban), representing several ethnicities (although the majority are white) and every region of the country.

Although some questions appear often, there are also variations from interview to interview, as Pfefferle seems to have been diligent about his research and asks questions of particular relevance to each individual. The excerpts below, a sample of the replies to his question about the impact of place on the poet’s work, give a sense of how interesting and varied the responses are:

“In terms of how it’s affected my work, it’s always seemed to me that *how* we live is one of the great subjects of poetry.... And for me, that means the material life in landscape ... at least as much as it means inter-relationships among human beings” – Elizabeth Dodd (p. 264).

“I get my spiritual self regenerated in the woods, in nature. Wild country is my church. You combine those things—the idea of spiritual regeneration or communion and this boundless source of images that I get from the

wild world—and it’s everything about what I do as a poet”—Robert Wrigley (p. 67).

“I think that it’s true for so many people who come out of Mississippi. If you’re born into a place like that ... it fuels you, trying to grapple with that beautiful and troubled history”—Natasha Tretheway (pp. 163-164).

“I’ve moved around a great deal in my life, and particularly while growing up.... Not thinking anything was permanent ... meant that a sense of commitment to a ‘real’ was hard for me to develop”—Lisa Samuels (p. 34).

“For me, maybe it’s less a matter of place than of placelessness. I grew up on air force bases, moving around nearly every single year until I was in high school. Sometimes I think that’s the reason I became a writer: I could create a sort of world to carry around with me”—Carl Phillips (p. 253).

“I’ve lived so many places ... that I paradoxically became more interested in the idea of place”—Nicole Cooley (p. 210).

“In some respects the places I’ve lived have been irrelevant”—Dave Smith (p. 206).

A number of themes come up repeatedly in the interviews, and the poets’ ruminations on these themes are as multifaceted as their answers to the question about the impact of place. Although I have not counted, I was left with the impression that something like 95 percent of the group have moved several times in their lives, so the disruption of leaving one place and learning to know another is a frequent subject. (And it seems to me that some graduate student might find a rich thesis or dissertation topic in studying the impact of such a nomadic existence on the work of various writers.) Other recurring topics include time, memory, and the persistence or transformation of the poet’s earliest or “default” landscape; the importance of “attending” (by seeing, walking through, staring at, listening) to place; regional differences in poetry; and the possible effects of geography and weather on poetic content but also on form. One sees this particularly in the interviews with poets who have moved to the West as adults; Bin Ramke comments, for example:

“The past is extremely present in the South, but it’s also decomposing and turning into something else. But here, that past of the mountains is visible and much more resistant to change. There’s a way that my own work has wanted to show much longer historical and geographical reverberations” (p. 271).

Another theme is the way particular landscapes or elements within a landscape trigger poems. Lucie Brock-Broido wins my prize for the most eccentric answer to this last:

“I have always known that when I was writing I have actually been in one particular place in my mind’s eye. And that is the city of Haworth. It’s Bronte country.... I’ve known since I was fifteen and read *Wuthering Heights* that that landscape was home to me” (p. 221).

The book is long, nearly three hundred pages. Since I was reviewing it, I read straight through from beginning to end, but if I hadn’t been I might have bounced around, reading the interviews with my favorite poets first, skipping others entirely. If I had, I would have missed the “story,” told in interleaved short pieces rather like diary entries, of the journey taken by Pfefferle and his wife Beth. This is the “tales from the road” of the title, relating the excitement of starting out in their newly purchased RV, the highs and lows of the journey. They give the book a certain momentum as one follows the narrator’s adventures.

In these interspersed pieces, Pfefferle describes the landscapes, the weather, the towns and their buildings; in his introductions to the interviews, he usually describes the poet’s neighborhood and the actual place where the poet writes, the desk or studio or room, if he has been invited to see it. Appropriately, given the book’s intent, this detail enriches the interviews by providing a sense of the poet’s place; one imagines Barbara Drake’s “vineyard amidst the rolling foothills of a far western Oregon, surrounded by fields covered with hazelnut and walnut trees” (p. 90), or David Lehman in his “tiny book- and manuscript-filled apartment” (p. 214) in Manhattan.

Although on the whole I enjoyed this book a great deal, I do have some dissatisfactions. A poem is appended to a little more than half the interviews; this is fine, but it makes one wonder, why not to all? The choice of poems sometimes seems almost whimsical; in some cases the piece reflects ideas that were discussed in the interview, whereas in others it seems to have no relationship, or even to contradict, what the poet has said about his or her work. This is perhaps the book’s greatest weakness; if I were going to use it in a class, I would want to find better examples of the poets’ work to supplement the interviews.

My second complaint is personal: no poets from the San Francisco Bay area are included. Pfefferle explains why, in a piece called “Choosing” (p. 194) that describes

his process for selecting interview subjects: “When a number of poets from one area couldn’t meet with me, it left a few blank spots on our map—the Bay Area of California for one, upper New England for another” (pp. 194-195). Understandable, but disappointing for this reader.

Finally, I wish Pfefferle had included some sort of “contributors’ notes.” Although I am familiar with many of the poets, quite a few were new to me and I would have liked to have a little more information at hand. That said, there is no question that creating such a section would have added to the already monumental task of writing this book, and perhaps was dispensed with in the interest of timely publication.

Selected interviews might make interesting supplemental reading for a literature class studying poetry or taking an eco-critical focus. It was surprising, for this reader, how few poets mentioned ecological issues or environmental degradation, but one of the strengths of Pf-

efferle’s choice of interview subjects is that he did not try to recruit only people known as “nature poets.” Thus, educators in any setting, urban, suburban, or rural, might use the book as a springboard to a discussion of how individuals form their sense of place, of home. Is one’s relationship to the more-than-human world a critical factor? For some poets, the answer seems to be no, for others unequivocally yes; for all of them, the answer is complex. Students would likely enjoy interviewing each other on the same topic, or writing about the role of place in their own lives.

As Michael S. Harper says, “[P]oetry is all about one’s neighborhood. And particularly one’s psychic neighborhood, where one lives in one’s head” (p. 224). As an intriguing glimpse into the psychic and actual neighborhoods of a cross-section of living American poets, *Poets on Place* has much to offer readers interested in the subject of place.

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