

Author's Note: Matt Wells, a student at Florida State, requested an interview for a poetry class he was taking. They were to do an assignment, a project, on the author of their choice. I felt very honored to have been Matt's choice. Here is the interview:
~C.J.

**Interview with Author, C.J. Heck
by Matt Wells, Student at Florida State University, March 2001:**

1. What inspired you as a writer? In other words, do you have a certain place you like to go to write, or a certain music you like to listen to when you write? Any habits at all that help you focus when you're writing?

My inspiration comes from many places, depending upon the subject matter. By this, I mean whether I'm writing a story for adults or children or poetry for adults or children.

The children's stories originally came about as bedtime stories I made up for my three daughters when they were small. The subject usually revolved around a particular event or situation that happened during that particular day.

Like most children, at times they said things in anger to hurt each other -- things they really didn't mean. The situation was over and forgotten by bedtime, and everyone was happy and loving again, but I felt I could subtly reinforce a positive life lesson by incorporating it into a bedtime story. The Magic Banana was born one night after one of the girls "wished" her younger sister would disappear because she was being annoying.

With *The Little Umbrella*, the point was a little more obvious. One of my daughters was feeling left out with her friends in the neighborhood and "wished" she could be more like them. I knew, and wanted her to see, that she was already special just the way she was.

It isn't too much different with my other poetry for children. Everyone wants to have their problems or fears validated. Children are just small people, after all. Their problems and fears are no less significant to them than ours are to us as grownups. A lot of what I write is humorous, yes, but it's the validation of their fears and problems that I like most to address and have children identify with.

One example: as a child, I was particularly afraid of the Boogie Man. This went on day after day and my parents were becoming concerned. My mother was very wise. She handled the situation by "inviting" the Boogie Man to our house. A place was set at the kitchen table every night. He was included in our nightly prayers, and when we went on family outings, he was asked to go along. Eventually, of course, it was unnecessary

because he had become a non-issue. I came to understand he wasn't bad at all -- only very lonely. As a direct result, "To The Boogie Man" was written.

Another example is the poem, "My Dragon". I have a large brown birthmark on the front of my neck. It's quite visible and, as a child, it concerned me very much. My wise mother's way of handling it was to tell me God put it there because I was cute. The end result was, instead of feeling embarrassed and self-conscious about the birthmark, I felt special and not just a little proud to have been singled out to wear it. I hope when children read or hear this poem, they think of their own imperfections and realize just how unique it makes them as a person.

Do I have a certain place I like to go to or certain music I like to listen to when I write? Not really, at least for the children's poetry. When the muse hits me, I thankfully write wherever I am! I've been known to scribble thoughts or ideas on a napkin in a restaurant, on the back of my grocery list in a checkout line, or on the palm of my hand when no paper is available.

With the adult poetry, it's different. Sometimes, it does help to be in a special place or listen to a favorite CD. A special favorite is the soundtrack from the movie, "Somewhere In Time", with Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour. I also love to listen to anything by Enya. Her music is beautiful and at the same time sensually haunting.

One of my favorite places to go is a lighthouse in Maine, called Nubble Light. When the world and its problems seem large and overbearing, it's the place where I want to be. Often the muse hits me while I'm sitting there on those house-sized boulders with the ocean surrounding me, the expanse of sky above, and feeling the sea spray on my cheeks and the wind in my hair.

2. How did you get into poetry? What turned you onto it?

I guess I'd have to say I've had a very interesting life. Most of what I write comes directly from my experiences, either in trying to "find" myself, or in expressing my feelings. Some are totally new perspectives gained along the way. Still others come from a distant memory.

I've worked in many different jobs, i.e., a life guard, waitress in an ice cream shop, sandwich maker in a deli, secretary, flight attendant, school van driver for special needs children, a records clerk in the detective division of a police department, insurance sales, radio advertising, a newspaper columnist, and I've owned a small business.

Some of the poetry is sad, or private and personal. I've been married three times. My

first husband, Doug, was an army medic in Viet Nam. He was killed in action in 1969 and decorated posthumously. This happened eight months after we were married, when I was only twenty-one. It was very painful. I wrote a lot of poetry during that time. It helped me to cope with the devastation I was feeling.

Other poems are softly sensual. Still others came about as a result of the writing challenges I encountered in poetry forums I belonged to when I got my first computer and went online.

3. Do you have a favorite poem of your own, or a group of favorites?

Difficult question. I would have to say that each poem is a favorite -- well, at least while I am writing it. When I'm struck by the muse it's exhilarating trying to find just the right words to express the thoughts and ideas swirling around in my mind. Sometimes I look up and say to my Higher Power, "Ok, you have to help me with this. You know what I'm trying to say. Help me to find the right words. Help me say it like you want it said."

Joking aside, when I look at my work as a whole, I do have favorites that stand out -- both from "Barking Spiders", my first book, and from the sequel which is finished.

My favorites tend to be those that came from my own experiences as a child -- poignant little memories which made me feel I was loved as a child, and cherished as a person, by my parents. Some of those are:

Mama, Am I Pretty?
My Dragon
Child's Masterpiece
Children of the Rainbow
To The Boogie Man
The Quarter
Teddy Bear
The Clown
Pretty Flower

4. Do you favor rhyming over not rhyming in your poetry? Is there one technique you like better than the other, or is it simply whatever comes to mind at the time?

Excellent question. I've asked myself the very same thing. I would have to say, "It depends." With the children's poetry, I almost always use rhyme and meter. I feel rhyme and rhythm make it simple for children to recite and relate to, also to

remember. Think back. Remember the Mother Goose nursery rhymes? I used to love them. All of them had both rhyme and meter.

With the adult poetry, I have a tendency to more often rhyme the lighthearted and humorous, while taking a more serious free verse approach to the serious ones. It's just my way. Of course, if you line up fifty poets and ask them each the same question, you'd probably get at least twenty-five different approaches.

5. Why do you love writing about children so much? Is it just for sheer fun or just your favorite topic? Personally, I love it.

Originally, my poetry for children was intended to be a personal and private gift to my three daughters. It was a compilation of poignant little slices of life -- mine and theirs -- a love-legacy, of sorts, to be given to them on my death.

For years, I had been jotting down my poems in notebooks, dozens of them. One day, my middle daughter, Bethany, caught me hurriedly scribbling a poem while she was over for a visit. After much pleading, I agreed to let her take a peek. I never expected the response I got from her.

"Mom, why are you hiding these? You should DO something with them! These are wonderful and should be shared."

At about the same time, my husband and I bought our first computer. Once online, I started going to writers' forums and joined in by posting both my adult poetry and the poetry for children. It was a give and take kind of thing, very much a learning experience. You critique the poetry of other poets and, in turn, they critique yours. I loved it, and I grew as a writer as a result. I guess you could say, the rest sort of took off from there.

After much thought, I went to Geocities and signed up for one of their do-it-yourself website builders. Once the initial website was up and running, I did a lot of research to learn the nearly impossible html coding and then redid the website to reflect my own personal style -- the one that is now online and what came to be the beginning: I finally knew what I wanted to be when I grew up ...

6. Are you writing for money or does that even matter to you?

I'm sitting here smiling ... while I do consider my writing to be a labor of love, I did quit a full-time job to pursue a career in writing, once I decided that was what I wanted to do. Yes, it would be nice to make a living at it.

I began promoting "Barking Spiders Poetry" soon after its release in 2000 by doing book readings and by autographing books at bookstores and libraries. You can charge an honorarium to speak at a library, but it's usually just a token amount.

What's fun is, I'm now invited to schools to talk to the students and teachers from K through 8th grade -- this is what makes the money for a writer. I don't want to burst anyone's bubble, but you don't make much on the sale of books.

7. Is there any certain response you're going for from your audience?

Good question -- and there isn't a simple answer. In my case, there are several forms of "audience" ...

The first kind is a peer audience. I have some of my work posted at online ezines, writing communities, blogs and poetry cafes. These are where I first started sharing my work. The responses give a sense of acceptance, as well as respect as a writer.

Another form of audience: the readers who visit my website. I love reading the emails and guest book entries from parents, teachers, grandparents, or elementary education students. They have been heartwarming and more positive than I had ever dreamed possible.

My favorite audience, though, hands down, is the real-time audience -- the kind I have when I'm doing a book reading or a school visit, or any time I'm speaking to a large group of children or adults.

The highest high of all for me is to look into the sea of smiling faces. It's that one instant when I connect with them that's the best and most welcomed response of all. There is no greater compliment, not only as a writer, but as a person.

8. Do you intend for your poetry to be read by adults as much as you do by children?

Yes, I do. Well, maybe not at first. At the outset, I wrote the poetry for children and intended it to be read by children. What came as a tremendous surprise to me was the overwhelming response from adults. Most tell me they were taken back to their own memories of childhood through the poems, while reading them to the children in their lives.

For some special, wonderful reason, the poetry seems to transcend all age barriers. Again, nothing could make me happier.

9. Do you focus any of your poetry on adults? I mean, do you write any of these children's poems for adults to read, as a release from adulthood?

I would have to say no. But, I am very pleased if their temporary "release from adulthood" has come about as a side effect of my poetry for children.

10. Does writing for adults (your other poetry) have any comparison with how much you enjoy writing for children?

Oh wow. Those two forms of poetry are such different animals!

As I mentioned earlier, the poetry for children was originally intended for only my own three daughters. In that respect, the poetry for children has always been from the real me -- the way down deep inside me. I do have a genuine love for children -- not just my own, but all children. I know I'll always have a tender spot for writing the poetry for children. It has always been, and will always be, very dear to me.

On the flip side, writing an adult poem has always been from the real me, too -- the woman me. Hmmm. I hadn't thought of it that way before.

11. Do you enjoy the works of Shel Silverstein?

Yes! I've always loved Shel Silverstein. I used to love reading his books to my daughters and now, to my grandchildren. His poetic humor was unique and his books are already classics which will be enjoyed by generations to come.

12. Does Shel Silverstein's poetry remind you of your own?

I have been compared to Shel by several people and I've felt flattered by it, but my own opinion is ... she who flies with sparrows bows to one who soars with eagles ... Shel Silverstein is in a class by himself.

13. How much of your poetry is related to your own childhood experiences? Is it a toss up, or do you write more now as you see your children and grandchildren growing up?

A lot of the poetry I write for children is based on either my own childhood or that of my siblings. Some is written as a result of something observed or heard, maybe in a checkout line or at a mall. The rest come from my children and now my grandchildren.

With all of the children in the world, I should have a never-ending supply of great ideas, right?

14. What are these "cookbooks" that you have your poetry printed in?

(laughing) Oh those? Three schools in different parts of the country asked my permission to use my poetry in cookbooks they were going to print for a fundraiser.

I was invited by teachers who read my first tentative postings of children's poetry over at Lovestories.com. I was told many of the elementary schools around the country do a similar fundraiser each year to make money for their school.

That particular year, the idea was to do a class cookbook to sell to residents of their town. In each class, the children were to bring in their favorite recipe. Then a class photograph was taken for the front of the cookbook. It was a lot of fun for me and each of the schools sent me a copy when they were done.

15. What kind of work did you do in your column, "Through the Eyes of a Child"? Poetry, short stories, or what?

I guess you could say it was a combination of a poem and an essay. I had carte blanche, really -- I could use anywhere between 600-700 words. The story piece, intended for the adults, usually centered on the main theme of the poem, i.e., where the idea for the poem came from in my mind, the subtle message for children that was contained in the poem, etc.

For instance, one column was about racial prejudice. The poem I used was Children of The Rainbow, which is about a young girl whose best friend was black. In the poem, she has a conversation with her grandmother about how the other children in school won't play with her friend because she's different.

Other columns dealt with issues such as the death of a parent or grandparent. For those columns I used Windows in Heaven and Grandma's Apron.

I will always extend a special thanks to the editors of The Bedford Journal Newspaper for entrusting this green writer with a column and allowing me the freedom to grow and spread my wings.

16. How do you get yourself in the mind of a child like it seems that you do?

Fun question! I remember back to when I was a child, I guess. I remember seeing something or hearing something when I was little and at the time, wondering, "Why"?

Had I asked them, I'm sure my parents would have bent over backwards to give me the best answer -- and they probably did, at the time.

Thankfully, I just seem to have an ability to look at most situations around me and get in there under it, seeing it as a child would see it. Or maybe it's a case of just being more in tune with the little girl who still lives down inside me. After all is said and done, aren't we all just little children with a few more years on top?