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A Conversation with Rita Mae Reese author of *The Alphabet Conspiracy: Poems*

While pursuing your MFA, you worked at the Dictionary of American Regional English and immersed yourself in the online edition of the OED. How was this work translated into your poetry?

When I discovered *DARE*, literally just down the hall from the creative writing program, I felt as if I'd come across a cave full of treasure. I couldn't believe the other writers hadn't completely ransacked the place. I worked there looking up word slips, going through the fieldworker's notes, sometimes reading old, obscure books looking for local usage. The fieldworker's notes were just fantastic—they showed such a sense of time, place, and people. I began working on a novel, tentatively titled *Local Usage*, to capture some of that. I also began working on some poems. One that is most directly connected to that work is "Who Will Give My Father a Needle, a Mouse, a Cat, a Bird?" from a test used to determine differences in pronunciation. I expect the things I discovered at *DARE*, and *DARE* itself, will continue to influence and inform my work for a very long time.

Once, when I worked for a lesbian press, they had the two-volume edition of the *OED* in the archives on a pedestal. I loved stopping at it and looking up random words and I swore that one day I'd own one myself. I was pretty excited to discover that I had access to the online version as a student at UW-Madison. I spent hours figuring out how to use searches to find all of the spurious entries, looking up quotations for words that I liked, jumping from one word to another.

Could you talk about how you chose the title of your book?

As I started tracing patterns in the *OED* and making up my own etymologies, I started to think of myself as a conspiracy linguist, though I'm certainly not really a linguist, even an armchair one. I love the story behind words, though and I enjoyed creating connections, causality, where there wasn't really any. When I came across the old Bell Labs film, "The Alphabet Conspiracy," on the Internet Archives, I felt the same way I did when I'd discovered *DARE*. It took me a long time to write the actual title poem though—I had to wait for the threads to come together.

I also often think of the Elizabeth Bishop poem, "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," particularly the line: "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and.'" Her insistence that there is no narrative to her travels, no causal chain to extend to the reader, is something I find really wise and sad. So part of what I wanted to explore in the poems in *The Alphabet Conspiracy* is the human need for narrative, the need to see causes and effects and patterns where none really exist. This is part of the conspiracy mentality that I find sort of child-like.

You grew up in West Virginia with two sisters and a single mother. If etymology could trace your history back to your childhood, what words would hold the most significance?

I grew up believing in a promised land outside of West Virginia, a place without poverty or racism, or if not a place then at least a life for myself without those things. I'm not sure where this idea came from—maybe it was like the British accent I had when I entered kindergarten, something picked up from television or some quiet and forgotten

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neighbor. So two of the words or terms that got under my skin the most were “nigger” and “white trash.” My grade school was predominantly African American and very small, very poor. When I was in fifth grade the school combined the fifth and sixth grade classes because we had so few students. One of the sixth grade white boys started bullying the fifth graders right away and what bothered me the most was his use of the word “nigger.” I felt it couldn’t be a real word—like the word “ain’t” that our teacher charged us a penny for every time we used it—so I looked it up in the dictionary. To my deep disappointment, it was there and was defined as “uncouth,” which I also had to look up. I took the dictionary and whacked the bully with it, calling him uncouth. Later, I remember seeing him with his father at a carnival and understanding more about who he was, what he was dealing with, and I felt a little bad about hitting him. The whole incident made me wary of words, dictionaries, others, and myself and that wariness has been a theme for most of my writing. . . . The other term, “white trash” simply elicited shame in me. There was no self-righteous defending of an injured third party—just deep, thick shame.

So would you agree that these poems reflect a certain “class consciousness?”

When I was first learning about the 60s, it came as a shock to me to realize my mother was young in the 60s but she’d never been a hippy, never protested a war or any of that. I had such a monolithic view of American experience, even though my own experience completely contradicted that. Anyway, I asked her why she hadn’t been a hippy, and she snorted and said, “I worked.” It made me realize how much history gets lost or hidden by those two words. Working people still get left out of the history books, despite the progress made by folks such as Zinn and Terkel and Ehrenreich.

So a lot of what I try to do, mostly for myself, is to go back and reconstruct history from my own class perspective. Stories such as Vivian Buck’s are so important, and show a lot about why the lower classes are still deeply skeptical about government solutions to poverty.

You mention that your book might appeal to “fringe Christians.” How so?

I’m a big fan of Marilynne Robinson, her non-fiction work as much as her fiction. I remember an essay she had in *Harper’s* a while back that said something along the lines of the label “Christian” needs to be embraced and reclaimed from fundamentalists (or literalists, as I tend to think of them). There are a lot of people who have a strong faith, a strong belief system, that reject traditional labels but also might not be comfortable with a loose term like “spiritual.” I believe these poems would appeal to them. I’m interested in the “fringe” sections of society in general—people who could identify with a certain group but can’t be totally accounted for by that group’s standards and mores. And even though I use the term “fringe,” that describes the majority rather than the minority of people. . . . I’m also a big fan of Melville and often think of the line from *Moby Dick*: “I now know that thy proper worship is defiance.” There’s definitely some Ahab in me.

This is your debut collection of poems, and the fourth edition published by Arktoi Books. One of the goals of this imprint is to publish lesbian authors in order to involve them further “in the conversation.” What does this mean to you?

When I was in high school, quite a few people signed my yearbook with a version of “you’re really weird but I like you!” I couldn’t figure out why they thought I was so strange, though when we played “who would you want to be stranded on a desert island with?” I insisted on Spock (he is, for better or worse, a bit of a lesbian role model for me). Though they didn’t know I was a lesbian (I didn’t really know then), they knew something was a little off center. *The Alphabet Conspiracy* is also a little off center; it’s a strange book—cycling through different personas, going back and forth in time, developing its own strange theories about the world. Because of Arktoi, I didn’t need to try to make the book a little more normal—I believe that part of the benefit and responsibility of being outside the mainstream is to change the conversation, not to conform to it.

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