

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARVIN MALONE

BY MARK WEBER

(1 Jan 96, abridged 2 Mar 99)

MW: Where were you born & raised?

MM: Born in Fairbury, Nebraska, in the depths of the Depression and raised on a 160-acre farm 9 miles from town. The area was depopulated by hard times but our family persisted. Since I had no sisters or brothers and no neighbors, my friends and playmates were farm animals. A Carnegie free public library in town was visited once a week, every week, on Saturday, and the maximum number of books were checked out. This self-education process resulted in a love of books, early attempts at writing, and a good measure of self-reliance.

MW: Was religion prevalent in the home during your youth?

MM: The family was not religious and took life as it was dealt, trying to cope through foresight, planning, physical work, and persistence. Our philosophical cornerstone was to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

MW: Are you musical?

MM: When I was around 9-10, my father bought a radio and rigged it to work on a car battery. A wind charger was set up to keep the battery powered. The Texaco opera broadcasts became important. Mother tried to teach me piano, but I had little aptitude. Preferred to draw and sketch instead. I like the works of Bach and Bartók especially but tend to avoid orchestral presentations in favor of chamber music. I like to be able to hear the sound of individual musicians as opposed to the massed sound of a group.

MW: If you were a concert musician, what instrument would you play?

MM: Flute.

MW: What years did you live in Albuquerque? What was the city like for you then?

MM: Moved to Albuquerque in 1958 to teach at the good University of New Mexico there. Liked the dry air, the long horizons, the straight-talking people, the distinctive architecture, and especially the smell of piñon smoke from working fireplaces at night. The varied cultural environment encouraged me in printmaking, painting in gouache and oil, and mimeograph publishing.

MW: When did you move to California?

MM: To California from Connecticut in 1969.

MW: What sets you off writing a poem?

MM: All poems come from actual experiences and personal observations. They incubate in the brain as phrases for a long time before being written down on paper scraps in a form that's quite incomplete. In my reviewing folders of such scraps, the fragments begin to link and fuse, and the rough poem is typed. With every typing, there are deletions and revisions, with the poem becoming more and more concise.

MW: What advice do you have for someone first reading FINNEGANS WAKE?

MM: Reading FINNEGANS WAKE is a lifetime project, so one should relax with the book in a quiet room, in a good chair with a good source of light over the left shoulder. Be willing to read aloud and savor the flow of the words. Take the book in small doses at first, perhaps no more than one page per sitting. Don't force content on the words. At the next session, reread the page(s) of the previous session. Understanding comes from the reading out loud. A good secondary resource is Frances Boldereff's READING FINNEGANS WAKE.

MW: How did WORMWOOD REVIEW come upon Saul Steinberg's drawings?

MM: I collect little magazines and related materials and know a small group of sympathetic book dealers. These gentlemen also know that I'm interested in illustrator drawings and cartoon art. Such items continually turn up. In the 1950s, Saul Steinberg did some advertising art, and the originals finally surfaced in a dealer's stock and passed to me. Stripped of advertising and cleaned up, they make handsome covers for WORMWOOD.

MW: Do you listen to music while working on WORMWOOD?

MM: When reading submitted manuscripts, I prefer silence, but when typing copy and pasting up, I take whatever the radio offers in classical or modern music.

MW: What is your favorite color?

MM: A bright, clear blue, although sunflower yellow is very pleasurable.

MW: Were you immediately taken by Bukowski's writings upon first reading?

MM: I first came across Bukowski in the pages of HEARSE and was attracted to his unique energy. With the publication of FLOWER, FIST AND BESTIAL WAIL, I became a fan and collector of C. B.

MW: What are your thoughts on William Burroughs's idea that words/language/linear thought are an invading virus, a virus that restricts our possibilities?

MM: I take virtually the opposite tack: words/language dealing with real life observations open up possibilities in both thought and action.

MW: Who are your all-time top 5 favorite graphic artists/painters?

MM: Rockwell Kent, Edward Hopper, Max Ernst, Stanley Spencer, Arthur Dove.

MW: Do you like to cook?

MM: Not really, but I love to eat.

MW: In the drink absinthe, I understand the active psychoactive ingredient is thujone, found in the plant shrub wormwood. Have you ever drunk old-fashioned absinthe?

MM: Have never drunk absinthe. I wouldn't mind trying it if I could find a reliable source. It's still illegal in the USA, I believe.

MW: How many aliases do you have?

MM: The pen names I've used in a WORMWOOD context are M. K. Book, Ernest Stranger, A. Sypher, and Saul Manilla. There may be more. . . .

MW: Could Steve Richmond's work be called flow of consciousness writing?

MM: Not really.

MW: What is, to you, the distinguishing characteristic of Gerald Locklin's poems?

MM: Wit.

MW: Can you describe the poems of Fred Voss in one word?

MM: Muscular.

MW: Why are Joan Jobe Smith's poems so readable?

MM: Her poems are written to be read aloud, frequently as one long, run-on sentence.

MW: Where did you first come upon Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel's?

MM: As submissions to WORMWOOD in 1980.

MW: Mustard or ketchup or mayonnaise on your cheeseburgers?

MM: While I love strong homemade mustard, the condiment of choice for cheeseburgers is clearly ketchup.