

Stories (and Poems) Live in My Head: An Interview with Claudia Emerson and Warren Rochelle

by Tom H. Ray

Claudia Emerson and Warren Rochelle are professors of English at the University of Mary Washington. They originally met while in the MFA Writing Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Both of them have also worked in libraries.

Claudia Emerson was recently named the Poet Laureate of Virginia and in 2006 won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. She is the author of three volumes of poetry—*Pharaoh*, *Pharaoh*; *Pinion: An Elegy*; and *Late Wife*—all published by the Louisiana State University Press. She is also a contributing editor for the literary magazine *Shenandoah*. In her late twenties, she served as a branch librarian in Pittsylvania County.

Warren Rochelle is the author of two science fiction novels, *The Wild Boy* and *Harvest of Changelings*, published by Golden Gryphon Press. He also writes articles on rhetoric and literature. His first book, *Communities of the Heart: The Rhetoric of Myth in the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*, was published in 2001 by the Liverpool University Press. Prior to teaching college English, he earned an MLS from Columbia University and worked as a librarian for eleven years.

I have known Warren Rochelle for a number of years, and a couple of years ago I met his friend and colleague Claudia Emerson. When the suggestion for doing interviews for Virginia Libraries came along, I realized I had never actually talked to them about

their writing. The double interview was an experiment to see how two very different writers approach their craft and how it influences, or is influenced by, their careers as educators and their personal lives.

Getting away from it all? The act of writing can be its own disappearance....

My favorite part of the interview is the final section in which the authors wrote a "life as haiku." I hope the interview encourages Virginia librarians to read these two very fine authors.

VL How did each of you come to the University of Mary Washington? Where do you go to get away from it all?

WR We both applied twice. The first time I applied, when I was in the waning days of my doctoral program at UNC Greensboro, was the second time Claudia applied, when the department was looking for a poet. The second time for me was in 2000, when I was teaching at Limestone College in Gaffney, SC, (home of the Giant Peach) and living in Spartanburg. I consider the SC years my years-in-exile. Claudia and I first met as scared thirty-something gradu-

ate students in the MFA program at UNC Greensboro. We never thought we would be teaching at the same school together or starting a new creative writing program there together.

Where do I go to get away from it all? Sometimes into a book, into a movie, into a story I am working on. I love the beach and the mountains. Art museums are escapes for me.

CE After I didn't get the Mary Washington position the first time, I took a job as academic dean of Chatham Hall, a girls' boarding school in my hometown. In 1997, my first year as dean, my first book, *Pharaoh*, *Pharaoh*, came out from Louisiana State University Press—and the following year the Mary Washington position came open again. I had been a finalist for the position the first time, and having a book just out from a good press helped secure the position when I applied again.

Getting away from it all? The act of writing can be its own disappearance, but my absolute favorite physical retreat is the Shenandoah National Park, only seventy miles from Fredericksburg. My husband and I love to hike. His band is

Tom H. Ray has been at the Library of Virginia for almost fifteen years. His current position is collection management coordinator.



called Stony Man after our favorite trail and mountain!

VL How does teaching writing or literature influence your own creativity and writing? Do you see a distinction between your teaching persona and your writing persona?

WR How does teaching writing and/or literature influence my own creativity and writing? Good question. I think one way is that I find myself more aware that I am doing what I tell my students to do—such as, for example, remembering the value of rich description and the particularity of detail, or practicing “show, don’t tell.” I also find I can use my own experiences as illustration. Just the other day a student in my Tolkien seminar asked if Tolkien set out to deliberately use his Catholicism in *The Lord of the Rings*. My answer: mostly no, but he did write out of the inescapable context of his life—and I used a similar example from my own life and my own fiction.

Do I see a distinction between my teaching and writing personas? I think so. I see my writing persona as more private and less inclined to be like the performer in my teaching persona.

CE Teaching is also a creative act, and I have always found a wonderful dovetailing between my writing and an active engagement in others’ work.

My writing personality is my first nature—private, reflective, observant. I need a certain measure of solitude for creative and intellectual energy. I am what I call a “learned extrovert.” While I love the classroom, I had to learn the art of being on that particular stage. The challenge was to find an authentic public self that encouraged and welcomed students while reflecting the best of my private self.

VL What advice do you give students that you most often do not heed yourself?

WR Get more sleep!

CE I’ll echo Warren on that—and add exercise!

VL Librarians are the intended audience for this interview. How do you utilize the Mary Washington library or your public library? Do you have a favorite library story?

WR How do I utilize Simpson Library (UMW’s library)? I use the online catalog all the time, for such things as needed information for book orders, setting up a reserve list for a class, and directing students to resources beyond Google. I use the interlibrary loan service regularly. I use the library collection all the time for my academic and personal research. I schedule library research classes for my students every semester. I love our library and I love libraries!

Do I have a favorite library story? Maybe a favorite memory will do. When I started first grade my mother started taking me to the

Chapel Hill Public Library, which in the early 1960s was in an old, crowded white house on Franklin Street downtown. Supposedly this house used to be owned by a Mrs. Green who ran a business of ill repute on the premises. The house was jammed, packed, stuffed with books, books, books, and books. Books were crammed into the bathroom—I swear I remember them lined on the top of the toilet tank—on the creaking stairs, and just about every space that could be made into a shelf. The floors creaked, too. Having learned in first grade to write “1-M” on the checkout card, I carefully did the same thing at the public library. In a way, I grew up in the Chapel Hill Public Library (the white house and its successors).

CE I also use the online resources all the time—and while I adore my 1930s-era *Webster's*, I also haunt the *Oxford English Dictionary* online. We also have the best reference librarian in the world in Jack Bales—an accomplished author himself!

Like Warren, I grew up going to the library—and then in my late twenties was hired to be a Pittsylvania County branch librarian in what was then a little two-room former schoolhouse of a library in Gretna, Virginia. We were open four afternoons a week, and my assistant was an eighty-year-old delight of a woman named Alma Gay. We loved our patrons and each other—and had many joyful afternoons!

VL If you were not in an academic environment, where do you think you'd be?

WR I think I'd be working in a bookstore. I grew up browsing in the Intimate Bookshop, also on Franklin Street, next door to the Varsity Theatre. It was a sad day when the original store burned, and a sadder day when they went out of business.

By the way, I was a school librarian for eleven years before going back to graduate school at UNC Greensboro. I worked in North Carolina in public and private schools and for two years overseas in Cartagena, Colombia.

CE I have a diverse list of what I call “missed professions”: librarian, veterinarian, park ranger, ornithologist, and environmental scientist/activist top the list!

VL Why do you write? Putting aside the fun of having a “name in print” or the need for tenure—why, *personally*, do you write?

Having your name in print isn't just fun; it is a major rush.

WR Having your name in print isn't just fun; it is a major rush. Why do I write? It is a matter of self: this is who I am. If I don't write regularly I find myself feeling out of phase, or out of sync, with the universe. Everything is askew and just not quite right.

CE I have long known the truth that despite a fifteen-year career in the academy, I don't think of what I write as something “academic.” Poetry is a primary lens on the world for me; I would write poetry even if I were in one of those other professions I listed earlier.

VL How do you characterize your work? What have been the defining moments thus far in your life as a writer?

WR I would characterize my creative work as science fiction and fantasy. A defining moment? When I sold my first short story, “A Peaceful Heart,” to *Aboriginal Sci-*

ence Fiction for real money. When I received the first copies of my first novel, *The Wild Boy*. When I read a review in which the reviewer really gets the book.

CE My book projects have changed over time, but so far I have written poetry almost exclusively. Defining moments? Getting into graduate school in poetry at UNC-G after being out of school for a decade; having Dave Smith call me asking if he could publish my first book with his signature series Southern Messenger Poets through Louisiana State University Press, the press I had always dreamed of joining; being invited to read at the Library of Congress; being named Poet Laureate of Virginia; and, of course, being awarded the Pulitzer Prize for my third book was just thrilling.

VL Is writing for you a collaborative or solitary activity? Do you have a muse (real or imagined?); another inspiration; or a “wall” off which to bounce ideas and drafts?

WR Writing, for me, is both collaborative and solitary. I have an established reader-exchange relationship with a friend I met in grad school, and we exchange and critique each other's work on a regular basis. I have a second reader here in Fredericksburg, and we do the same thing for each other. Both of these reader-friends have been godsend. For muses, I have a dear friend in Atlanta, whom I have known since high school, who is something of a wall for bouncing off ideas and drafts as well. Some literary muses include Ursula K. Le Guin, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Robin McKinley, William Faulkner, Madeleine L'Engle, Julian May ...

CE The act of writing poetry is a solitary one for me, though I do like to “talk out” ideas with friends and my husband. I also have trusted first readers in Betty Adcock, my mentor and friend;

and R. T. Smith, who is a wonderful poet and fiction writer and editor of *Shenandoah*, *the Washington and Lee University Review*.

VL In this age of PCs, spell check, and print-on-demand publishing, what is your relationship with an editor?

WR While I have met my editor, Gary Turner at Golden Gryphon Press, only once, I feel, thanks to email, we have a friendly and supportive relationship.

CE I have a wonderful book editor in Dave Smith—and he has throughout all of the changing book projects offered sound feedback just before publication. LSU also has superb copyeditors who help me hone the books.

VL Can you remember the first thing you wrote? How has your writing voice changed since then?

WR The first thing I ever wrote? Good Lord, I have written stories since I could write; and before that (and after), I drew stories on the backs of used typing paper my mother would bring home from her job as a secretary at Duke University. I remember writing in third grade, after reading *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a very bad imitation with a High Queen as opposed to a High King. A myth explaining the seasons that I wrote in sixth grade sticks in my head. Clearly I wrote a lot of fantasy, even as a child. My writing voice has grown up, or rather it has become more real and authentic and honest and less imitative.

CE While I wrote some poems and songs in high school and college, I also initially wrote short stories. My voice has changed completely, though I still value the natural world for its metaphorical richness—and I have done that all my life.

VL Are there other types of writing you would like to try? Are there things in your writing closet that may never see the light of day?

WR I wrote a science fiction play—set on another planet—that is absolutely awful. I hope no one ever sees it. The novel I wrote my senior year at Carolina was deep and profound and ghostly.

Other types of writing? The personal essay is one in which I am especially interested.

I feel almost a physical urgency and a certain excitement that I must write this poem.

CE I'd like to try the essay and one day a novel perhaps.

There are countless drafts of poems I abandoned along the way, trying to write my way to the "keepers."

VL What kinds of books, articles, or authors do you read for enjoyment? What authors or genres most challenge you?

WR For enjoyment: science fiction, fantasy, memoir, travel, personal essays, and mainstream novels.

Authors that challenge me: the first one to come to mind is Eckhart Tolle and his book *A New Earth*.

CE I love a good novel and am an intermittent fan of biography. I also read a lot of science writers. If by "challenging" you mean "difficult to get into," I'll say poetry that has as its purpose an experiment that is more important than any meaning.

VL Career-wise and personally, where do you want to be when you are sixty?

WR When I am sixty—which isn't as far away as I would like to think, sigh—I would like for our creative writing concentration to be a program with a functioning director, a national reputation, and a secure and safe budget. I hope to have a few more books published, and I would like to be better known for my work. Personally, a bigger house.

CE I echo Warren that by the time I am sixty I'd like to see this program nationally recognized, vital, and filled with eager, talented students. In my writing life, I hope for two more books, at least (I am fifty-one). In my personal life, I hope to nurture the great happiness I have in my marriage and help my husband Kent further his music.

VL Do you have any questions for each other?

WR How do you know a poem is coming?

CE I feel almost a physical urgency and a certain excitement that I must write this poem. My process can be slow—months of mulling over an idea and taking notes—but once I feel ready to write, the actual composition can be days long and all-consuming.

CE Do you miss your characters when you're done with a book or story?

WR Yes, I do. I have found myself wondering what happened to them next or how things turned out, which, in the case of *Harvest of Changelings*, has led to a sequel. I found Gavin, the protagonist of my short story "The Golden Boy," so interesting that I wrote a (still unpublished) novel, which gave me a lot more room to explore Gavin's world and his character. Missing them doesn't always mean another story, but I do find myself

growing fond of them. I have lived with them for a long time; I hate to see them go.

VL The *Washington Post* sometimes profiles readers' lives in pieces called "Life as Haiku." Would you write a "life as haiku" about yourself for our readers?

WR Stories live in my head, and I live, at least part-time, in there with them. They gather weight, until finally there is enough for the words to stay anchored to a page. I feel them, as Virginia Woolf said, expectant and heavy. Sometimes an impulse to read seems to

connect to this expectant story, to the story already in process. Here,

**I feel them, as Virginia
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and heavy.**

read this, this is what your imagination needs now to go on, for the story to flower as it must. I write because I have to. Fairy tales are true.

CE My mother would not tolerate boredom in me, claiming that my boredom would say more about me than whatever I might be complaining about. From this, I learned to pay closer attention to everything, and to have confidence enough to look at a bird, a spider, anything, as though no one had ever seen the world the way I might. Poetry is the highest ordering of language, and I have found in that intensity a medium through which I can fuse the world with my inner landscape and make meaning from the chaos of abstract emotion. **VL**



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