

Bruce Hunter presents Russell Thornton for Brick Books 2015

When Jane Munro's *Blue Sonoma* (Brick Books, 2014) and Russell Thornton's *The Hundred Lives* (Quattro Books, 2014) appeared on the Griffin prize shortlist during National Poetry Month in April, 2015, I cheered. As a former West Coaster and as a 50 years and counting reader of Canadian poetry, I knew both names. I thought, I'd not have wanted to be on that jury. Munro's work in *Blue Sonoma* is the poetry of language stripped bare, yet metaphorically and emotionally rich. Much of Thornton's *The Hundred Lives*, is a departure from his earlier works of compressed lyricism. It's a book that steps out, swaggers and sways in places. It is garrulous but never galootish. What follows is a short appreciation of *The Hundred Lives*, my recent conversation with Russell and finally, links to reviews of his work, interviews and articles about him

In *The Hundred Lives*, Russell Thornton reaches from the lyric into narrative and dramatic forms that encompass mythology and Biblical stories. Cumulatively, many of the poems and sequences are as complex and layered as short stories or plays. Thornton has always been a writer who lives not in a place but through it. Nowhere is it more evident than in the book's first section "With a Greek Pen". This is not a tourist visiting Greece, but a poet living through a culture, with the joys and challenges of the present and richness of its past. It's a rambunctious and passionate read by one hard-working poet of great intelligence and compassion. Here's a tasty passage from a narrative poem that is the story of a day, "Turning the Lamb"

It is my turn to sit and rotate the handle of the spit.

The whole lamb had been roasting since morning,
now it was glistening, juices trickling steadily out of it.

The lamb fumes thickened. I sat inches away

From the bed of coals, the heat in my face

The brilliant white light of the Greek spring in my eyes,

Looking at you, your mother, aunts, uncles, cousins.

Music had been put on, and was pulsing and blaring....

Thornton slowly, surely fills the walled yard behind a Greek apartment with the day's smells, rhythms, and the people who live at a different pace and like all of us with past and present calamities that determine their shared future.

Part of the poem's tension comes from the poet's musing on whether his lover's mother wishes him to stay, unlike the husband who left her for his girlfriend weeks after their marriage, or her father she lost to the Greek resistance and the war. Thornton's takes a quick nimble step away from the day's narrative to give us this bit before he cuts to the ending:

The dancing resumed, the music grew loud and swerved
as the singer became more and more ecstatic, and I saw myself
still sitting near the lamb on its spit, as at a strict interface,
and shouted and pleaded within, slaughterer and slaughtered.

This is poetry, sensuously nuanced, physical and metaphysical, lyrical, narrative and dramatic, often all at once. *The Hundred Lives* is an ambitious achievement and contains excerpts from an ongoing series called "from Book of the Dark Dove" which hints at the poet's future and, possibly, master work.

I first encountered Russell Thornton's poetry in the late 1970s, probably in one of his earlier books, I was struck then by his clarity and passion. Who wouldn't be wooed by those attributes? One of his early poems was about driving a cab and Thornton's keen observations of his customers. There was already a compelling directness and intimacy to his work.

I encountered Russell again, this time in person, in the fall 2000 in Saskatoon for a launch of Thistledown Press of his first book with them, *The Fifth Window* and my third *Coming Home From Home*. He writes elsewhere of that meeting and his nerves before pulling a copy of my second book, *The Beekeeper's Daughter*, out of his knapsack for me to sign. I remember being nervous too, for he was already a poet worth watching.

Russell introduced himself and there was no small talk. He leapt in and quoted a line from my poem about an episode of family violence. It's a line so painful, I questioned even if I should utter. He told me how deeply it affected him. I immediately appreciated his directness and obvious sincerity. Right then, I sensed he "got" me and I think I got him. There's a handful of men and women I've met

over the years, I've felt the same way about: Irving Layton, interestingly enough a teacher of both us, which we discuss below. Others include writers, artists, musicians and more from a host of cultures and professions. They are passionate and engaged with the world and often contend with much pain and their creativity offers grace. That conversation came back to me often. Then life and work got busy.

Years went by and a friend mentioned Russell's newest book *Birds, Stones, Metal & Rain* (Harbour, 2014) which I reviewed for *Canadian Poetries*. It was easy to see why he had become a well-regarded poet with a significant body of work and honours to his credit.

I was not surprised. All that early promise and those initial impressions had been realized, and then some. Not without life's challenges, like all of us. So it was heartening to see his name and Jane Munro's on the Griffin shortlist as two writers who'd kept going. It's a credit to the esthetic and intellectual generosity of the Griffin prize jury to have chosen Munro's book and Thornton's as together they represent a broad spectrum of poetry's possibilities.

My recent conversation with Russell follows. Afterwards, I've posted links to a number of interviews and my review of *Birds, Stones, Metal & Rain* for *Canadian Poetries*.

1) We had the same teacher Irving Layton, albeit for me over much less time. But his impact on me was long-lasting. Can you tell me more about Layton and his impact on you, Russell?

We both knew Layton way back when. It's a nice feeling when you get the chance to speak a little about Layton with someone who was his student or friend, isn't it? It's like coming across a long lost family relation. I met and became friends with Layton when I was 19, a formative time in anyone's life, I guess; he was a powerful force as a poet and a person, and he affected me deeply.

I was pretending to be a student at McGill. I was already on my third university in the US and Canada. I hated "school". I picked up *A Red Carpet for the Sun* from my then girlfriend's parents' coffee table in Montreal. Took the book with me and hardly put it down for the next few days. Went to the McGill Library and the Jewish Public Library and got hold of all his other volumes. Hardly put any of them down for the next few weeks. I was, as they say, hooked. Then I interviewed him for *The McGill Daily* student newspaper before a reading he did at Champlain

College. We hit it off. Stayed in touch. And then I took two evening classes with him at Concordia. The classes were Intro to Poetry and Intro to Writing Poetry. Suddenly I actually became a student. Wrote down his every syllable. I came under his spell – as so many people did! I was fairly messed up, I admit; he saw it and took me under his wing. I could tell that he'd had an uncomfortable early life – and come through. He was an older helper, a guide. But also we just liked each other. You know, I've read and heard a lot of things about Layton – but to me, well, he was the definition of kindness and friendship across a couple of generations. All this time after the fact, he comes back to me at regular intervals, and I think I could fill a book with my little memories of the guy, but I'll share two.

When I was in his classes, I'd walk with him along St. Catherine after the classes. He'd always go to the same cigar shop. I remember it was hilarious seeing him talk with the proprietor, trying to wangle samples of this cigar, that cigar. He'd wink at me. Then the proprietor would wink at me. They went through the same routine every week, and it was clear that they both loved every minute of it. We'd go to his apt., eat, and sit around. He liked to drink brandy, wine. He recommended a lot of books! He'd give me books. He gave gifts like breathing. After I told him I'd read William Blake since childhood, we ended up reading William Blake out loud together. Which felt weird! And I loved it. I'd walk back to my apartment in a state of enormous excitement – as if I'd been in the company of some kind of god.

A visit with Layton would keep me going for days. And if he uttered a word or two of praise in my direction, I'd start to think that I could do anything. Well, maybe get to the point where I'd be able to write a satisfactory poem[\[BHI\]](#) .

After he and I had both left Montreal, I saw him a few times at readings he did in Vancouver and elsewhere. He'd phone me once in a while. Other than that – I corresponded with him. The correspondence lasted a long time – until he was in his eighties and I could tell his health was going. The first time he phoned me it was 5:30 a.m. Vancouver time on a Sunday morning. In those days I was flirting with a really unsavoury lifestyle. He seemed to know it. I picked up the phone in a stupor and I heard a voice boom, “Russell Thornton?! Are you Russell Thornton?!” I thought, Fuck, it's the RCMP. “Who wants to know?” I asked. “It's IRVING LAYTON. I'd like to speak with Russell.” I'd popped into his mind. He'd phoned. Didn't think about the time difference. The guy lived in eternity.

2) Right from the early poems about you driving a cab, your observations and love for people have always been evident. Can you tell me about that?

Like you, Bruce, people have been and continue to be essential in whatever stuff I perpetrate on the page. Your work is filled with hard reverence for human beings. That poem “Towards a Definition of Pornography” wasn’t the only one of yours I could recite by heart. “When Love Was a Fist” I could probably reel off if pushed: “And we all called it love” at the end gets me every time. Maybe it’s your feeling for people that’s always attracted me most to your poems – your full-heartedness; that, and the naturalness of your speech. The naturalness – and taut intensity.

In my own poems, I think I’ve found that in trying to write about family members and other people who have affected me, hopefully I’ve gone at least a little way towards uttering what I want to utter in poems, and uttered it sounding how I’d like to sound. As a reader, I have to ask, What is the subject of poetry if not what it is to be human? And the greatest books, for my money, are about fathers and mothers and sons and daughters and brothers and sisters. And lovers and beloveds. And friends. What’s Gilgamesh about, after all? Antigone? Oedipus the King? The story of Abraham and Isaac? In the most powerful and elemental literary works, there’s an almost unbearable amount of emotional energy at stake, and this energy flows between human beings. And between human beings and a mysterious other: the invisible, the unfathomable – God? I don’t know. Call it whatever you want. It is and isn’t those human beings. That’s the way I see it anyway. And because of this, I feel that writing about people can offer intimations of one of the bedrock formulae for art.

3) “Taut intensity” or internal combustion? But thank you, Russell. And your intensity in your poetry and in person is striking. But let’s talk about your spirituality which is there from the very beginning: the strong spiritual connection to nature and to human nature. *The Hundred Lives*, however, takes us deep into both mythological and Biblical realms. Are you religious?

I had no upbringing in any conventional religion. Have never signed up to any religion either. My immigrant grandparents were Catholic and Protestant (Irish and Scottish) and Jewish (western European) background; all ended up secular people – Canadian West Coast nature worshippers more than anything else. Still, I’ve read the King James Bible many times and continue to read it. I’m hypnotized by the language and the stories and parcels of meaning the language carries. I’ve taken courses in Hebrew (in my stumbling way) in order to attempt to read the

Psalms, *Job*, and the *Song of Songs* in the original. I've done the same with Persian to be able to try to read a couple of classical Persian poets in the original. And I lived in Greece for three years – and tried to pick up enough Greek to at least appreciate the sounds of what I had the chance to hear of ancient Greek drama and lyric poems. Come to think of it, in Greece, traditional religion is everywhere – in the air – and probably I couldn't help but be affected by that in some measure. I suppose in all these cases I was interested in investigating what I figured might be the pure drop in poetry – which maybe in these particular languages is more at hand than in other tongues; with Hebrew and Persian especially, as verbal codes they seem designed for accessing spiritual reality, or, let's say, the depths of concrete existence, the inner aspects of whatever this "world" is in which we live out our bewildering contraptions of human consciousness.

4) Watching you as a lyric poet try on the other forms, such as narrative and dramatic was so much fun. Can you talk about what you do in *The Hundred Lives*?

I appreciate your mentioning this. I was aware in putting together my book *The Hundred Lives* that I was presenting these sorts of variations – but it wasn't part of any plan. It was just intuition – it felt right; it gave me a sense of freedom. And since I never expect to be read, I didn't care whether it worked or not! But, you know, it occurs to me that the switching of genres is what happens in the Bible, sometimes within a Shakespeare play, and in the great Irish and Welsh epics. Things will go on for a while as narrative then concentrate into lyric form, and then move into what are essentially plays for voices, and so on. It's satisfying to me. I guess if you write it's because you're an enthralled reader and you want to go do the same thing – no matter how inept you might be in comparison!

Russell, thank you for the continuing conversation, for your poems over the years and for your appreciation of the work of others.

A brief list of other sources on Russell Thornton's poetry including *Kelly Shepherd* for *The Coastal Spectator*, *Sean Cranbury* for *49th Shelf* (which includes a podcast of Russell reading), *rob mcclennan's* poetry blog, *Catherine Graham* for *Rusty Toque*, **stephen e. leckie** for the *Malahat Review* as well as my review for *Canadian Poetries*..

<http://coastalspectator.ca/?p=4422>

<http://49thshelf.com/Blog/2015/06/013/The-Interruption-With-Russell-Thornton>

http://www.malahatreview.ca/interviews/thornton_interview.html

<http://www.therustytoque.com/rusty-talk/russell-thornton-poet>

<http://robmcclennan.blogspot.ca/2014/06/six-questions-with-russell-thornton.html>

<http://www.canadianpoetries.com/micro-reviews/2013/8/27/birds-metals-stones-rain-by-russell-thornton-harbour-2013>