



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



'Time and Space do not care what I believe': Robert Masterson, American Poet and Author in Conversation with Ajit Kumar

Photo: Lesley Eringer

*Professor Robert Masterson lives and works in the megalopolis of New York City, but spent his formative years in the American West, growing up and going to school in Colorado and New Mexico. First published at age 19, Masterson has written award-winning fiction, journalism, and creative nonfiction steadily ever since. His books of poetry and short prose, *Trial by Water* (1982), *Artificial Rats & Electric Cats* (2008), and *Garnish Trouble* (2011), have become collector's items. Masterson's work as a lecturer, a writer, and a teacher has taken him around the world, and his work appears in numerous anthologies, journals, magazines, newspapers, and on websites across the Internet. He is a professor of English at the City University of New York's BMCC campus and divides his time between New York, New Mexico, and travel.*

Dr Ajit Kumar interviewed Professor Masterson about his different literary books and many other less shared facts of his life.

Ajit: Sir, congratulations for the wonderful appreciations that you receive for your writing. How do you see compliments and appreciations made by your readers?

Robert: It is a difficult question to answer as it is a kind of paradox. First, I am hardly well known enough or complimented enough or appreciated enough for the question to really apply. I think one would have to work hard to make the case that I'm even a minor poet. Beyond that, how can one declare oneself to be humble without proving a lack of humility? It seems best to take all such things as compliments and appreciation if they arrive at all with an open heart, but as mindfully and thoughtfully as possible.

'Time and Space do not care what I believe': Robert Masterson, American Poet and Author in Conversation with Ajit Kumar.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 3 no. 2, August 2016
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

Ajit: It shows your modest heart, Sir. Could you please share about your school, college and university life as a student?

Robert: I was raised in the American West, in the states New Mexico and Colorado. I grew up in small towns far away from the city. This, I think, this landscape was important to me, helped to shape me while it influenced me. I went to college and I never really stopped. I've been to different schools, but, except for 5 years as a journalist, I have been a student, a teacher, or both.

Ajit: At the age of 19, you were first published, what was that about?

Robert: The poem was about the ancient petro glyphs common in the area in which I grew up. That was almost 40 years ago and I probably thought I had learned something. There was probably a metaphor involving stone and the nearby highway.

Ajit: Truly, it has been a voyage. How did you begin writing?

Robert: I've always been telling stories one way or another. Before I could read or write, I was telling stories, pretending to read, pretending to write, and playing with my father's typewriter. Perhaps I noticed that the people who worked the least told the best stories. Everyone else goes off to do things, build things, make things, create things. Story tellers get to 1) tell stories, 2) take time to think of new stories to tell, and 3) read other stories and call it 'research'.

Ajit: Were you always interested in literature? When did you start writing?

Robert: I started writing when I learned how to read. I copied a lot of things that I liked in handwriting or on the typewriter. I soon began to make up stories of my own. The more stories I saw, heard, and read, the more pleased I was. The more ideas I could plunder for new stories of my own pleased my playmates and my readers.

Ajit: Poetry is always close to one's heart. What made you to write poetry? I mean why not novel or drama?

Robert: I was attracted to poetry by the density of its language, the complete shaving away of all unnecessary words. Someone once told me or I read that the summary of a poem, that one of the real tests of whether a chunk of language qualifies as 'poetry', that the summary of a real poem will by necessity be longer, use more of the language. The essential American examples of this are probably William Carlos Williams' poem 'The Red Wheelbarrow' and Ernest Hemingway's six-word novel.

Ajit: Did you ever think that you would become one of the prominent poets of USA?

Robert: Well, I'm not. So, really, I don't have to think about that. I can wonder why I am not of the prominent poets in the USA. I can lay me down and wonder why my name is not in bright poetry lights, why what I write seems to have such an impact on such a limited number of people but I've somehow stuttered short in the form, I've done what I did, and there we are.

ARCHIVED AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY: [DSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU](http://dSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU)

'Time and Space do not care what I believe': Robert Masterson, American Poet and Author in Conversation with Ajit Kumar.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 3 no. 2, August 2016
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

Ajit: There are always our role models or ideals whom we get inspired from. Among the poets, which poets have impressed you the most? And do you find the effect of those poets in your writing?

Robert: Frank O'Hara, Richard Brautigan, Hunter S. Thompson, Jack Kerouac, Thomas Lux, William S. Burroughs, Yukio Mishima, Gary Snyder, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Patti Smith, Jim Carroll, Cormac McCarthy, Holling Clancy Holling, Edward Abbey, Lee Bartlett...so many, too many, not nearly enough. If someone was to ask me, 'How?', I'd have to answer in the same way that all writers influence other writers, especially younger writers – by being examples, by proving that it's even possible to write and be read and to read and be written, by showing the way, by giving their talents to the world as gifts.

Ajit: Now I am going to ask you very difficult question. Difficult because it's a long time ago when you wrote but we would like to know when did you write *Trial by Water* and what was your psychological state of mind?

Robert: That's funny. I have no idea how to answer that. That book is over 35 years old; I couldn't possibly recall what I was thinking at the time. I was in school, I was writing a lot, most of my friends were artists of some kind or another...it was a fertile time. I lived with a lot of different roommates in a lot of different houses and apartments and old store fronts. I'm sure my memories of these times are much different than other peoples', the other people that were there, and the other people who were not there, and I'm sure that if I met the person that I was all those decades ago, I wouldn't nor would I care to recognise myself.

Ajit: It is said that poetry is a straight exposition of emotions. Do you believe it?

Robert: It can be. Or, more to my own work, poetry is the straight exposition of a moment in time and space. Emotion is an important part of that moment; the absence of emotion is an important part of that moment. To paraphrase: Time and Space do not care what I believe.

Ajit: What idea works behind *Garnish Trouble*?

Robert: Well, all these little short bits of prose are like snapshots, poetic freeze-frame images of a time, a place, and, if all the details are there and correct, the emotion. If all those things are working correctly, meaning unexplainably emerges. It's really kind of extraordinary when it happens.

Ajit: Let's talk about your next book, *Artificial Rats & Electric Cats* which has been widely appreciated. Could you please share a few lines from *Artificial Rats & Electric Cats*?

Robert: Asks the man who has not read the book. No, I will not, because that would mean I will have to get up and look for it and then read it and then regret writing it all over again. I will, however, tell you that I do remember several of the pieces, or the incidents behind the writing of the work that is in the book, that several of these intersections of time and space have stayed with me all these decades...the girl in pigtails wearing a dunce's cap as she rode in the back of a truck on the way to her execution; the jabbering man on the beach who insisted he spoke perfect English and who we protected one cloudy

ARCHIVED AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY: [DSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU](http://dspace.flinders.edu.au)

'Time and Space do not care what I believe': Robert Masterson, American Poet and Author in Conversation with Ajit Kumar.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 3 no. 2, August 2016
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

day on an island in the South China Sea; the way the sunlight caught the thread of drool that depended from a young girl's sleeping, open mouth to the sleeve of her quilted jacket, a naked boy asleep on the back of a water buffalo standing in a rice paddy.

Ajit: Wonderful Sir. Use of images in poetry is always appreciated. Readers and critics call you an Imagist. Do you really take care of using images in your poetry?

Robert: I'd like to know who called me anything, but that's another story. As to imagery, well, certainly. A poem almost always depends upon an image, a picture conjured and/or evoked for the reader. All meaning follows the image. There is the moment, real or fantastic. There is the writer. There is the writing. There is the written. There is the reader. If, through all those and, by only using language, something is sparked that even remotely resembles empathy, compassion, or connection, then I guess I am an Imagist.

Ajit: How do you see the use of free-verse style for poetry?

Robert: Freeing oneself from the constraints of meter and rhymers allows one to focus deeply upon meter and rhyme. Overt meter and rhymes work best for work that needs to be memorised and performed or recited or chanted or recalled in any way. When western writing moved into its written forms, that preservation of language, the codification of genealogical or historical chants, of heroic song cycles, of heraldic ballads, of laundry lists and dirty jokes, freed the storyteller from being a human library able to cough up just the right song or anecdote or scary tale for the moment. The writer was able to explore language in whole new ways, but for the task at hand, the writer was able to explore how the language sounded when it did not have meter and rhyme forced upon it. The writer could describe a scene and ask, 'Does that sound right?' rather than merely asking, 'Did that scan?' And by 'sounding right', the writer asks if those words, those sounds and silences as represented by marks upon stone or wood or clay or papyrus or vellum or parchment or paper are the correct words, are these the correct sounds and silences to convey meaning?

Ajit: It becomes sublime when a teacher of poetry, a poet himself teaches in the classroom. May you please provide more details about your experience as a teacher?

Robert: So varied. From maximum security, life-without-parole convicts in state prisons to 'gifted' high school children to college students to desperate Chinese professionals...each with a unique story and, in many ways, so similar.

Ajit: What made you combine both prose and poetry in your books?

Robert: It's simply what I write. Some things go together.

Ajit: What do you feel when you write about the different aspects of life?

Robert: I don't set out to write about an aspect of life. My point is not to elucidate or to instruct or to advise or to judge or to expound. I just want to capture a feeling.

ARCHIVED AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY: [DSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU](https://espace.flinders.edu.au)

'Time and Space do not care what I believe': Robert Masterson, American Poet and Author in Conversation with Ajit Kumar.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 3 no. 2, August 2016
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

Ajit: Feelings are very important for human beings. Especially in the case of a poet because he teaches the universe to love, feel and bless. How is the experience being a Poet and Professor in the US?

Robert: Mostly frustrating, you know. My lack of success in either occupation has led to great bitterness and self-reproach on my part. I should have been a truck driver.

Ajit: Sir, you are a wonderful poet and teacher. For human condition, literature is an essential part. What role does literature play in understanding the human condition?

Robert: Without art, including literature, there is no human condition. The only evidence we have for a condition, human or otherwise, is the art that speaks it from one human being to another as individuals and from a human being to all human beings. We may find and catalogue the shards and spear points from pre-human culture to learn more about the species, but it is the cave paintings that clutch our hearts with recognition of not only another, but of ourselves.

Ajit: Do you really plan to prepare a particular structure of your poems or you just let it go as it goes?

Robert: Both. I draft everything many, many times. I find it very difficult to be disciplined about writing. It is an aggravating process and I am almost always pretty miserable trying to write something well and correctly, and very happy to say that I have finished something and no longer need to agonise over it. And, still, every time I pick something up to submit to a magazine, I make a change, a little change, here or there, to make it better.

Ajit: In your poetry, you seem very optimistic; do you have any particular concept to follow in your poetry?

Robert: I certainly hope not. I find the term 'optimistic' a non sequitur. Would never dream of calling myself or my work 'optimistic'. In fact, 'dark' is one of the most popular adjectives used to describe what I write. And, no, I do not have a particular manifesto, theory, or concept to espouse.

Ajit: What are your future plans? What are you currently working on?

Robert: Nothing but to continue to do what I do. I have my teaching duties for CUNY – I am teaching four classes at BMCC – I am writing one story a month for a future project, and once in a while I write a poem but not too often.

Ajit: Sir, again one question which may be a difficult one. Which of your poems is the closest to your heart?

Robert: Too many to count. I always like my recent writing the best. It comes from the most immediate part of me. So, to finish this interview, here is one of the current bits I've been working on. I'm not sure it is complete (because, really, they never are; each time I look at something I've written, I change a word, add a sentence or a phrase, delete something awkward or silly), but here it is:

ARCHIVED AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY: [DSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU](http://dSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU)

'Time and Space do not care what I believe': Robert Masterson, American Poet and Author in Conversation with Ajit Kumar.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 3 no. 2, August 2016
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/

'My Life So Far Backwards'

April Eleventh Two Thousand and Sixteen

The snow is wide
And it stinks
Like if your retarded cousin
Set your uncle's fields
Of ripe wheat to fire

July Fifth Nineteen Ninety Four

Car trouble
So sad to think the car
My car
Is troubled
Inconsolable in a dirt road ditch

November Sixth Nineteen Eighty Two

Scabby knees and elbows
Sun-bruised noses
Birds pecking at the soft spots
Summer is pain

February Twenty Third Nineteen Seventy Five

New soft clothes
To take me to school
And come back
Hard

August Eighth Nineteen Sixty Nine

I am borned.

Ajit: It's wonderful and heart touching poem. Thank you very much for your time, Sir!

Robert: It is my honour. Thank you.

Ajit Kumaris a PhD. in English from Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, India. He has had good number of research papers published in national and international refereed journals and anthologies of English studies. He has two books to his credit, Feminine Issues: In the Writing of British Female Authors and Fragmented Societies: Feminism, Love and Identity in the Novels of Doris Lessing. He has interviewed many poets and authors from India, USA, UK, Ireland, France, Canada, Brazil and Pakistan.

ARCHIVED AT FLINDERS UNIVERSITY: [DSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU](http://dSPACE.FLINDERS.EDU.AU)

'Time and Space do not care what I believe': Robert Masterson, American Poet and Author in Conversation with Ajit Kumar.

Writers in Conversation Vol. 3 no. 2, August 2016
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/