



“It Ain’t Me, Babe”

by Alan Minskoff
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I have just finished the introduction to a chapbook of my poems—*Point Blank*—that has the good fortune of being published later this year by Rick and Rosemary Ardinger’s Limberlost Press. In the introduction, I thought it helpful to warn the reader that what followed were fictions. D.J., the character inhabiting the poems, is fictional. Admittedly, his origins, his make-up, and his reason for being all evolved in my imagination. He is a composite, an amalgam of people I have known, read about or met. His sins, thankfully, are his own.

In this age of confessional poetry, I confess that I admire much poetic memoir. But my interest here differs. I believe the writer trains him- or herself by watching and looking, considering, then creating. The writer as observer—absorbing, studying, selecting—defines much of the best literary or creative nonfiction, where the essence of the craft is paying careful attention, getting it down, telling others’ stories. John McPhee, Gay Talese and Tracy Kidder are consummate practitioners of this art of the outsider looking in. Their close scrutiny combines with an abiding curiosity and need to explain how things work and how they happen.

Poets make wonderful observers; they create elegant if succinct reports. And a non-confessional, observational strain runs through poetry as well. Think of Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* or William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson*.

But some poets, like short-story writers and novelists, make stuff up. No need to trash the first person, self-reflective, and often illuminating work of the past century-and-a-half. Nor do I dismiss the fact that some writers use themselves as characters and subjects to fascinating ends. Walt Whitman began a trend that continues through Allen Ginsberg and Charles Bukowski, among many others. Novelists such as Philip Roth and Sandra Cisneros have used their families, even their own names to intensify their works and create doppelgangers. We live in the memoir's shining moment. But there is room at the creative trough for many angles of vision—inside-out, outside-in, upside-down—name it.

One way to categorize authors just may be as insiders and outsiders. (I don't mean established or not-established.) An insider would be loosely defined as self-possessed, confessional, concerned with life through the prism of his or her own experience. By contrast, the outsider would be more observational, interpretive of the human condition by commenting on, or inventing, others. (Never mind that some writers fit both categories.)

I believe it was Ibsen who said that at some point his characters took on lives of their own. While much contemporary poetry, and many memoirs, strive for larger meaning through the first person—self-portraits in convex, concave and opaque mirrors—there's always room for the storyteller who spends a morning at the Saturday market and later creates a world through a tomato-grower's eyes, allowing the character to wander where she will, to take on a life of her own. Ultimately, writers choose the form, voice, and point of view that the material dictates. Imagining a life that differs from

your own—the Walter Mitty strain in American literature—can free the poet from the constraints of autobiography and the tyranny of chronology.

Let the dogs out. Who knows what may happen then?

Alan Minskoff teaches journalism and writing at Albertson College of Idaho. The author of the chapbook *Blue Ink Runs Out on a Partly Cloudy Day* (Limberlost, 1994), his new chapbook *Point Blank: The D.J. Poems* is due out later this year. He taught for several years in the Log Cabin's Writers in the Schools program and Summer Writing Camp. The original chair of the Log Cabin Literary Center, he remains a board member.