

ADAM CLAY

Interview with Kate Greenstreet

Kate Greenstreet is currently on the road with her third book, Young Tambling. "Through a profoundly affecting assemblage of poetry, prose, and visual art, Young Tambling expands beyond its rich source material and becomes a forceful meditation on selfhood, trauma, and memory" (Kenyon Review). Her previous books are case sensitive and The Last 4 Things, all from Ahshta Press. Last year, she and her husband Max sold their house and went to live in Ireland, where all of her grandparents were born. When Young Tambling came out in January 2013, Greenstreet returned to the States to tour. If she says she crossed the state of Texas three times last spring, is that a boast or an admission of poor planning? Many things about Kate Greenstreet can be discovered at her site, kickingwind.com.



ADAM CLAY: Your book arrived in the mail and I remember sitting down and reading the text from start to finish. I'm curious to hear more about the process of writing (and assembling) the collection. Perhaps it's a forward question, but I felt such a connection to the book the minute that I opened it and it made me wonder about the process of putting together a book that radiates such a level of kinship between the poet and the reader. Did you find yourself consciously considering the reader's experience as you put the book together or did that come later during the design process?

KATE GREENSTREET: Pretty early on, I realized that I wouldn't be able to write this book unless I designed it. I had a lot of poetry to work with, but I knew *Young Tambling* also needed prose and art. I happened to be rereading *A Pattern Language*, which got me thinking about the book as a building, and I pictured the prose as columns to support the building—columns that would also function as the beginnings of the chapters. I assembled the manuscript on the wall of my studio in order to see it. I really couldn't have done it any other way.

I thought about the reader a lot. Using prose to begin each section was a way to say, "You can relax. I'm just talking to you now." I wasn't

trying to write prose poems. I didn't want the prose be mistaken for prose poems.

AC: I wonder if you might talk about the epigraphs that open each section—did choosing them come before you wrote the sections or did you write the sections and then seek out the quotes to introduce each particular section? I love the way they're obscured initially and then the way they come to light later.

KG: Over time I had collected a page of possible epigraphs, although I wasn't sure I wanted any. I felt I needed sections or chapters, and that each should have a title. I wondered if an epigraph could start every chapter.

Eventually I had the idea of erasing all but one word in each epigraph, using the unerased word as the chapter title and the complete epigraph as the introduction to the poetry that would follow the prose in each chapter. You can see how this developed from working on the wall! I had to look at it as I went along.

All the epigraphs were taken from my original page of possibles, except the one for the section "sung," which I came upon late, in Dan Beachy-Quick's book *Wonderful Investigations*. As the sections came together, I tested different quotations against them to see what felt right.

I also had a couple of secret epigraphs—sentences I never planned to use in the book but returned to frequently for inspiration. One is something Philip Glass said: "There's always a little space between what you think you hear and what you are going to hear." The other is from a lecture Dan Beachy-Quick gave in Missoula in 2007: "Part of the power of a poem is that it gives you access to its crisis."

There's meaning for me in using erasure as a design element. *Young Tambling* is "based on a true story" marked by the attempt to move from being or feeling invisible to uncovering what has been unseen, hidden, or locked away.

AC: I think that really sums up the experience I had reading the book—the speaker is constantly searching and as a reader, I felt like a part of that search, probably because of the intimacy of your work and voice, a quality that's consistent in all of your poems. Can you talk some about the overall process of writing the book? Did you, for the most part, write it as it appears (chronologically) or did you write various parts at different times? I ask because the intimacy I mentioned earlier comes from the uncovering and unfolding I see as

it occurs throughout the book. I've always wanted to write a book where I open a Word document and start writing (instead of writing poems or sections separately). *Young Tambling* has the feel of it happening organically in its opening up.

KG: I've always wanted to write a book that way too! *The Last 4 Things* felt like that at first, but I couldn't keep it up.

In the case of *Young Tambling*, I had five chapbooks to work with as well as newer poetry, reorganized/combined poems, and prose. None of it was written chronologically. I organized and reorganized it, wrote and rewrote it for years, trying to find the right structure. I wanted the book to feel to the reader (and to me) like it was unfolding naturally. So, thanks—I'm really glad it strikes you that way.

AC: I really think that feel was what made me want to read the book from start to finish. There's also the shape of the book itself, which we haven't talked about yet. When I see an Ahsahta book, I know it's one of theirs, design-wise, but also in simply the shape of the book itself. *Young Tambling* is different—almost a square. Tell me about this decision—why did you feel like it needed to be in this particular shape?

KG: I didn't want to have to break the longest lines and I didn't want short pieces stranded at the top of too-tall pages. But the main thing was just that I kept seeing the book (in my mind) as small and thick—almost like a piece of scrap lumber. Like a chunk of 2 X 6.

AC: I want to talk more specifically about the content of the book—your first two collections, *case sensitive* and *The Last Four Things* feel very personal, as does *Young Tambling*. You decided to put the phrase "Based on a true story" on the back of *Young Tambling*. Can you talk some about this choice and perhaps some of the things you discovered about yourself and your past through the book?

I wanted a cover without blurbs or an "about the author." The idea of putting "Based on a true story" in a field of white on the back occurred to me one day and I liked it because it was accurate and a little funny.

case sensitive started out as an attempt to write a novel. I was thinking about a character and a story. It's fiction. With *The Last 4 Things*, the writing was just coming to me and I followed it wherever it went. In the second half, a character began to emerge (not me).

On the other hand, while working on *Young Tambling* I was actively thinking about memoir. I was thinking about biography and

autobiography, and I was writing mostly about myself. I don't feel I discovered something new about my past, but I wasn't really trying to find out about my life—I was trying to find out about writing.

I had a title: *Young Tambling*. I felt I was going to write a book with that title, but why? What could that book be about? It's the name of a specific version of the ballad "Tam Lin," a version recorded by Anne Briggs in 1971. I thought about who I'd been when I first heard it. I thought about the story of Tam Lin and read whatever I could dig up about it, especially anything from a feminist perspective. I thought about Anne Briggs and the contrast between her life and the life of Sandy Denny (who'd done a famous version of "Tam Lin" with Fairport Convention) because they'd both been important to me. I thought about singing. I thought about women and girls. What has changed in the world since I was a girl, and what hasn't. I thought about certain traditional ballads I'd heard a thousand times. I read about the ballad form. I wondered about Francis Child and was amazed that there is so little material out there about him. I felt my way along, took notes, tried things, and when something seemed to work I took it as a sign to go in that direction.

I was also thinking about the idea of being called. Is it true that some of us or all of us are called to do something specific in life, or is that a fantasy? Is there such a thing as a "sign"?

AC: I see that throughout the book—it's really what most of life is all about, right? Trying to sort out some kind of order in the chaos.

I like thinking about the book as less about exploring your past but about discovering how to write. I don't want to jump ahead too quickly, but I am curious to hear what you learned and what your future writing might look like as the result of what you learned from *Young Tambling*.

KG: You know the idea "you are what you eat"? Whatever I learned is now part of me. And strangely, it hasn't led to new writing. I mean, I still write things down and I recently turned some of that into what might be a poem, but in a way I think I haven't yet finished *Young Tambling*.

In the spring of 2012, as Janet and I were working out the final book design, Max and I were getting rid of nearly everything we owned. Then we sold our house and left the country. While we were overseas, I spent a lot of time planning a long book tour, now halfway done. I wouldn't say it's the book tour to end all book tours, but it may be for me. By the time it wraps up, I hope I'll feel I did all I could

for *Young Tambling* and satisfied whatever else it is that attracts me to the road.

Maybe this time the tour has actually become part of the writing. When I rearrange pieces of the book to create new readings, sometimes I feel the writing is still turning into itself. And the videopoems I'm making from sections of *Young Tambling* also seem to be an aspect of finishing. I didn't foresee this. And I can't foresee what my future writing might look like. I'm not even sure that writing will be my main focus for the next few years.

AC: If not writing, then what's next? Another creative form? Painting, perhaps?

KG: Yes. The second half of the tour starts in Portland in September. After the final gig on the east coast in December, I want to spend some time painting and complete a few projects I had to leave in storage when we sold the house. I'll also be working on videos. I hope to put out a DVD next year called *The End of Something*.

AC: You and Max spend a lot of time on the road. How do you think these travels have changed your writing? I was out for eight days or so last April and being immersed in the poetic life for that long really began to change my mind and the way I thought about writing. Have you noticed something similar in your travels?

KG: I think it's interesting that you call being on the road "the poetic life." I want to think about that for a minute. What changes have you noticed in the ways you think about writing?

AC: I think that it's a combination of traveling with the poets I was reading with and also writing a poem a day through the month of April. It was a really intense experience trying to write each day, but I found that I would wake up each morning thinking about what the poem might be about. And our conversations on the road really fueled my work, too.

Michael Robins has this way of taking notes throughout the day with images we might see on the road. Driving through Oklahoma, we saw a baby calf on the other side of the fence, separated from the rest of the cows. It felt like images like that one would eventually filter their way into our writing, our work. The daily life here at home has poetry in it, of course, but it becomes peripheral to other responsibilities: being a spouse, a father, or a teacher. When I'm on the road for

readings, I really feel like a poet, you know? Do you? Do you write on the road? I'm also curious to hear how you're reading from the new book—do you move back and forth between sections?

KG: I don't tend to write on the road. When I'm touring, I have to spend a surprising amount of time writing emails to keep up with what just happened, what's about to happen, and what might happen in a few months. That doesn't exactly make me feel like a poet—though it's part of the job! When I'm traveling with other poets or hanging out before and after readings, we're mostly talking shop or talking about what's happened since we saw each other last—talking about what supports or interferes with being a poet, and that's interesting to me. But when I feel like a poet, usually I'm alone and not engaging with anyone—even myself, in a way. I need to disappear.

But I do feel like a poet in the ten to twenty minutes I'm doing the reading. And I feel something close to that earlier when I put together the reading for that night. Especially on this tour, because I'm reading from only one book, I've been chopping up the prose and sometimes using just a line or two from various pages of poetry, combining the pieces into something like a new (reading length) poem.

AC: I've heard a few people mention this—they said it seems like you have the book memorized and that you go back and forth, stringing it together. I love the possibilities inherent in this structure and form. It almost feels like the book itself could be cut up into pieces and rearranged in a million different formations. Have you ever thought about putting together some kind of a project like this, perhaps online? An interactive collection of poetry seems like something your work would be ideal for.

KG: I don't have the book memorized but I know it pretty well. I always know a book pretty well by the time it comes out. On the road, I get to know it even better. But every time I read, I look for what I don't know yet.

A random selection of the parts doesn't work for me. If it did, I wouldn't sweat so much creating a reading. But I look for something—something I haven't seen, even a small thing—or I think about a theme: growing up, sex, the choice to be an artist as a way to survive, the ones who don't survive—something. Sometimes when I'm building a reading, in the motel or in the car, Max will say, "You know, it really doesn't have to be a story." But for me—for a reading—it does. Even though I know a listener may not experience it that way.

In a book there can be so many levels of narrative, whereas a reading is short, and vocal—there's no chance for the audience to stop and consider. If I don't have a core of narrative to ground me, how can I expect them to stay with me? I don't know—I'm surprised a little, even as I say this—but story is important.

AC: Do you talk about the "story" (per se) as you read or do you just dive right in?

KG: I don't explain. Instead I hope that the way I'm reading can engage people in a nearly conversational way. There's a line in "56 Days" that comes to mind: "I keep getting words like *invisible*. Oh, I know what it is: *buried*." I look for a thread. That thread is what I'm calling the "story." It's not a story really, but it feels like a story to me.

I'm somewhat plot blind. If I'm watching a movie and Max comes into the room and asks me what's happening, very often I can't tell him. I'm following what I think of as the story but it's running slightly below the plot. I'm engaged by the atmosphere (that's kind of on top) and listening to the dialogue. If there's a character I can care about, I care. And I'm following something underneath the plot that could be called the thread. The thread is what the narrative rests on.

AC: You mentioned Max—and when I think of being at a reading with you, I see him standing in the back of the room, one hand cupped around his ear so he can hear the reading. How does having Max in the room each night change the way you read—or influence it? Does his presence play a role?

KG: I've only read a few times without Max in the room! His presence definitely makes a difference. I like to surprise him.

AC: My latest book wasn't published until four years or so after it was finished—the book was really new to me, if only because of what I had written after it. Each night of reading the work (and reading reviews of the book) allowed me to rediscover what I had created. I think, too, that reading with the same poets each night leads me to try something new each night, too.

KG: I know what you mean. Maybe it can feel new also because you're no longer the person who wrote it?

AC: I think that's right—when one writes a book, there are certain factors at play: the status of relationships, the physical surroundings, the state of the world, etc. In this way, a book of poems is a marker of a particular time from a particular perspective—and the further one travels from the space, the more distant the book feels. But not distant in a negative sense—it's like a memory.

We talked some informally the other day about prayer and this seems to be something that appears in *Young Tambling*—there's a meditative quality to the book, but in many ways poetry becomes a type of prayer, looking inwardly while also looking outward. It immediately makes me think about the question you posed at the end of your first book interviews—there's this solitary act of writing poetry, but then there's the world that it enters into, with the possibility that it might impact or change things in some way. So to end this interview, perhaps I'll send the question back to you: Can poetry change the world?

KG: What causes us to see things differently than we've seen them before? Art of any kind might make me realize that a way I speak or behave is harmful. I think language is important—how people talk to one another, and especially how we talk to each other about groups of others.

Poetry, at least in this country, is being read and heard by a small audience mostly made up of other poets. Some of us are trying to reach out into the future of poetry. Does innovation matter? Does innovation encourage other kinds of change?

When I did those interviews, I asked 104 poets, including myself, whether or not they thought poetry could create change in the world. People tended to say yes. Maybe that's because we'd like to feel that we're doing some good while we're doing what we need to do. A few people chose not to answer that question. You were one of those who decided to skip it. So I'm wondering, what do you think? Can poetry change the world?

AC: You turned the table on me! I think it can—I mean, when one writes poetry, there has to be some sort of hope that it can make it out into the world somewhere. Obviously there are some poets who write for themselves, but aren't they, in effect, changing the world or their perspective of the world? I don't really like thinking about audience to a certain extent, but I want my poems to exist outside of the world of poetry, too. Accessibility can sometimes be a four-letter word in the poetry world, and I'd like to hope that my poems—or yours—could reach someone who doesn't read poetry all that much. After all, most

people who read poetry are poets themselves, which isn't all that bad, but a broader audience is something I think about often. I love the quote from WCW: "It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." So what does this mean for the future of poetry? Is this even something we should be thinking about when making art?

KG: When I'm out doing readings, I have the opportunity to connect with a lot of people through my work. I'm able to reach them in a different way than a book can. I know that some readers find my poetry dumbfounding. All I have to do is go to Goodreads to discover the various ways my books can disappoint. But it's never my intention to be obscure. One reason I started making videopoems was that I imagined they could be more accessible than poems on a page.

Without books and music, I never would have survived my adolescence. Seriously. Strangers saved my life. I can't repay those artists. But is it too much to hope that we might be able to give to someone what has been given to us?