

CHEZMOY

Poet Paul Muldoon

INTERVIEW BY PETER KOCH

Poet Paul Muldoon's wife, author Jean Korelitz, once said of his playing in a rock band, "It occurs to me that much of his success in this odd endeavor derives from the fact that he just didn't know that the whole thing was impossible." The same might be said for his phenomenal success as a poet. Muldoon was born into a poor Catholic family in rural County Armagh, Northern Ireland, in 1951. From these modest beginnings, he's risen to become one of the most respected English-language poets. He's produced nine poetry collections, the last of which, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2003. Today, Muldoon lives in New Jersey, where he heads Princeton University's creative writing program, plays in the rock band Rackett and continues making sense of the world, one poem at a time.

What kind of books did you grow up reading? I've noticed a lot of references to *Treasure Island* in your poetry. "That's right (laughs). It continues to be one of my favorite books—it's terrifically well written and it's a ripping yarn. But there were many other books that fell into that category, of course. One of the things I was brought up on was digests of well-known novels, a series called "Classics Illustrated." They were sort of comic-book versions of great novels—*Around the World in 80 Days*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, *The Black Tulip*, *The Three Musketeers*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Moby Dick*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and so on. And that, funnily enough, is how I got a lot of my sense of literature, from this Cliff's Note-ish version of it. That's not to say that I didn't read some of these books in their entirety, but that was one form of reading. Another was my mother was a great believer in educational weeklies. At one time, comic books were believed to be the enemy of literacy, until educators caught onto the obvious tautology that a child who reads comic books *reads*. I was also brought up on a magazine called *Look and Learn*, and another called *Finding Out*, so I was particularly interested in general knowledge."

That comes through in your poetry today. "Yeah, I mean I'm just fascinated by...factoids. It just happens to be the thing I was interested in as a kid. It could easily have been baseball cards, except that wasn't such a big feature of our lives. It could've been stamp collecting. So there was all of that. The other great text I read was the *Junior World Encyclopedia*, a children's encyclopedia, which began with 'aardvark' and went to 'xylophone.' And, basically, I've been interested in everything between the aardvark and the xylophone ever since."

Growing up Catholic in Northern Ireland must have been strange. "Well it didn't seem strange at the time. It seems very strange now. It's a very rigid society, in which, of course, as the years go by, we discover that the very people who were imposing rigidities on us weren't always quite so rigid in their own lives. So I fear I have very little time for organized religion of any stripe. I am interested, however, in...I have some sort of spiritual sense, but not in terms of organized religion. I must say I'm quite happy to see the Catholic Church doing itself so much damage. The rigidity of that world picture, I'm glad to see it breaking down, I really am. I have no qualms about saying that at all."

It's been said that your poetry rarely deals directly with the troubles in Northern Ireland. Do you agree? "I don't think I do. I know that



people have said that along the way. I guess the big question is, 'What would dealing directly with it look like?' That's a little bit of a commonplace. I don't deal directly with it, perhaps, in the sense I've not espoused one position over another. That's certainly the case, because I don't really have much time for most of the positions espoused there, all of which tend to simplify the matter. And anybody who knows anything about it knows that it's a lot more complex than that. But the fact is that what had been the day-to-day violence of Northern Ireland is in the poems, for those who've read them. That's basically a line once heard from people who haven't read the poems. That's perfectly fine, I don't mind if people read them or not, just so long as they don't make too many claims about them without having read them."

You've been called the "crown prince of puns." "Sure, there's the old pun. People say the pun is the lowest form of wit. But they're the very people who would stand up on Sunday morning and admire the fact that Christ said to Peter, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.' Right? So they get very excited about that. As I've said before, if a pun's good enough for Christ, it's certainly good enough for me. Punning is a very natural thing. If you talk to a five- or six-year-old, they're natural punners. I use the occasional pun, but that's not the end of the story. Again, anybody who suggests that it is basically hasn't read the stuff."

Describe for me your writing process. Do you write only when you're inspired, or is it a daily process that you're always working at? "It depends what the story is. If I'm writing prose, it sort of is a daily process. With poetry, I don't actually spend a lot of time writing it. I haven't written a poem for months, for example. I have no idea even when the last one I wrote would've been. Most shorter poems are written over a fairly short period of time—a day or two. I might write one a month, say. So if you write one a month, you've 12 a year. By the time three years have gone by, lo and behold, you've a book."

Why do you think poetry is important? "Well, I think it is a way of trying to figure out what one's doing in the world. A way of trying to make sense of things, and there are many, many ways of doing it. One of them would be

to read *Junior World Encyclopedia*, one of them would be to pursue the aardvark, or indeed the xylophone. But it's a way of negotiating those things and making sense of the world, and making things in the world. It's just another form of construction, making things that might, in this case, help us to make sense of the space that we're in."

I understand you write songs for the rock band Rackett. "Yeah, I do write songs. We were playing last night, actually, and I'm stiff from it. So much energy has to go into it for a couple of hours on the guitar that my shoulders are sore. I'm not a musician at all. I strum a few chords, but basically I write the songs—the lyrics—for the band. The other guys are brilliant, but I'm their hanger-on, really."

Are your lyrics similar to your poetry? "It's a different business, really, a different business. If the poem brings its own music, the song lyric needs music to body it out. So that's the big difference. One would like to think that there's a room in the world for lyrics that are witty, as I hope they are, and fun in the way of the lyrics of some of the great, popular songwriters in a slightly earlier era. I'm thinking of Gershwin, Porter...particularly Ira Gershwin, a brilliant writer. In a strange way, I go back to them as much as to any of the contemporary songwriters who I'm a great fan of."

Have those songwriters influenced your poetry, too? "Probably, yeah, the rock music and various songwriters—Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Warren Zevon, et al. I think they've played a huge part in all of this."

You made an artist's statement years ago where you said that all you could say about your work was you "wish that it displayed a shade more wit and wisdom." "Yeah, I mean I really don't spend any time...I was talking about this last night with a few guys in the band. I never remember any of the songs that we've written, I can barely tell one from the next. I basically write them and move on. I'm not interested in things that I've done or that have been done through me. I'm interested in the next one, you know? That's really all I'm interested in. I've said that before, and I say it again, it just continues to be the case. It's just a thing I do, there's no point in thinking about what's been done. You can't even go back to it, it's very hard to go back to it, I don't like going back to it. My poems come in many different ways. Some of them are more evidently playful, many of them are not. There's a range of them, so I'm just interested in doing lots of different things. They seem to come out in different ways. I like to think that's healthy. We behave differently at different times of the day, depending on who we're with. So basically I'm just interested in the adventure of it."

So you stand by the statement, "I'm much less interested in what I've done, which almost certainly amounts to very little, than with what I might do, which will almost certainly not amount to much more?" "Well, that's right. You have to be realistic about this. Obviously, one does one's best. Everybody does his best, but somebody else may look at it and say it's garbage. The same may be true of me. I think I'm doing my best, but it may turn out to be a load of rubbish. Things come and go, reputations come and go. People thought John Donne was rubbish for 200 years. People still haven't quite read Emily Dickinson. You can't get too exercised about that."

So you can't take yourself too seriously? "Absolutely. I go in fear of people who do. The next thing you know they're running the country."

Paul Muldoon will turn Canisius College into "Chez Moy" when he reads there on March 2 at 8pm, as part of the College's Contemporary Writers Series. Grupp Fireside Lounge, 2001 Main Street, Buffalo.

LITCITY

2/23

Poetry Reading. 7pm. Canadian "Spam Poet" Rob Read reads from his latest collection *O Spam, Poams*. Big Orbit Gallery, 30D Essex St. (883-3209).

Poetry Reading. 11am. Nationally renowned poet Jeffrey McDaniel will discuss his work in Room 127, Fenton Hall. SUNY Fredonia, 280 Central Ave., Fredonia (673-3501); free.

2/24

Poetry Reading. 8pm. Poetry with Ida Skinner and acoustic music from Los Angeles' Lincoln Skinner and Buffalo's Sue Rozler. Mama Earth's Kitchen Cafe, St. Matthias Episcopal Church, 374 Main St., East Aurora (652-0377); \$6.

2/25

Booksigning. 2pm. Robert O. Swados, author of *Council in the Crease: A Big League Player in the Hockey Wars*. Borders Books, 2015 Walden Ave., Cheektowaga (685-2844).

Booksignings. 11am-2pm. Erno Rossi, author of *White Death: The Blizzard of '77 and Crystal Beach: The Good Old Days; Patrick Daley author of Cladagh and Pandemic; Robert Swiatek, author of Tick Tock Don't Stop, The Read My Lips Cookbook, Don't Bet On It, and For Seeing Eye Dogs Only*. The Bookworm, 34 Elm St., East Aurora (652-6554).

Reading. 3-5pm. Latin American author and activist Chesa Boudinwill discuss his recent work, 3-5pm. Rust Belt Books, 202 Allen St. (885-9535)

Writing Workshop. 12-4pm. *Creating a Family History: Session One* (next session on 3/4). Instructed by Christina Abt. CEPA Gallery, 617 Main St. (856-2717). Call to register; \$70-\$90.

2/26

Booksigning. 3pm. Chesa Boudin, author of *The Venezuelan Revolution: 100 Questions, 100 Answers*. Talking Leaves Books, 951 Elmwood Ave. (884-9524); free.

Michel Houellebecq's Birthday. 4pm. Share your favorite work by the author with an open reading hosted by Ted Pelton and Ethan Paquin. Rust Belt Books, 202 Allen St. (885-9535)

Poetry Reading. 2pm. Buffalo State College Professors Peter Ramos & Elizabeth Kelley. Burchfield-Penney Art Center, 1300 Elmwood Ave. (878-601); free

2/28

Tuesday Night Book Group. 7:30pm. Discussion of Joyce Carol Oates' novel *The Falls*. Borders Books, 2015 Walden Ave., Cheektowaga (685-2844). Pre-registration required.

Venice: Mystery and Intrigue. 1-3pm. Five-week course on John Brendt's novel *The City of Falling Angels*, every Tuesday through March 21. Instructed by B.G. Flickinger. The Larkin Center, 65 Lincoln Pkwy. (400-9786); call to register.

3/1

Open Readings. 7pm. Featuring Robert Nesbitt and Carrie Garner, with slots available for open readers. Center for Inquiry, 1310 Sweet Home Rd. (636-4869).

Writing Workshop. 6:30pm. *Womens' Lives and Legacies: Session One* (next session on 3/8). YWCA of the Tonawandas, 49 Tremont St., N. Tonawanda (692-5580); registration required.

RECURRING EVENTS

Bookmarkers Club. 7pm, every third Wed. each month. YWCA of the Tonawandas, 49 Tremont St., N. Tonawanda (692-5580); registration required.

Children's Writers & Illustrators Group. 7pm, every third Thursday each month. Borders Books, 2015 Walden Ave., Cheektowaga (685-2844).

EM Tea Coffee Cup Open Mic Poetry Series. 7-9:30pm every Tuesday. EM Tea Coffee Cup Café, 80 Oakgrove Ave. at Hughes St. (884-1444).

Just Buffalo Writers Critique Group. 7pm, meets first and third Wednesday of every month. Flux Gallery, Market Arcade Arts Centre; just buffalo literary center members only. Call 832-5400.

Moonlight Poetry Circle. 9pm, first Friday of each month. Share poetry informally through spoken word, song, music, art, etc. 289 Winspear Ave (upper). Call 903-2884.

Northside Writers Group. 7pm, first and third Thursday of each month. Ascension Lutheran Church, 4640 Main Street, Amherst. (626-4204).

Send weekly literary event info (name, description, location, date, time, and admission) to: editorial@artvoice.com, subject "In The Margins" or fax to: 881-6682. Listings must be received by the Wednesday before publication for consideration.

BACK BY POPULAR DEMAND: POETRY IN ARTVOICE!

In The Margins will feature poetry from local writers in the issue of March 16. **The deadline for consideration of submitted poems is Monday, March 6.** The new poetry editor is Florine Melnyk. Florine has worked as an editor for *ecopoetics* magazine, as well as a manuscript reader and editor for Buffalo's own Starcherone Books. Submissions of no more than five poems and no more than 10 pages in length can be sent by email to florine@starcherone.com or by mail to: Florine Melnyk, Poetry Editor: Artvoice, 810 Main St., Buffalo, NY 14202. Please include a self-addressed stamped envelope to have manuscripts returned or receive a reply via mail.