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The Poet and the Library: An Interview with Judson Mitcham

Interview by Cheryl Stiles

In May 2012 Governor Nathan Deal appointed Macon resident Judson Mitcham as Georgia's new Poet Laureate. Born in 1948 in Monroe, GA, Mitcham is the author of five books, including two novels, *The Sweet Everlasting* and *Sabbath Creek*, and three volumes of poetry, *Somewhere in Ecclesiastes*, *This April Day*, and *A Little Salvation: Poems Old and New*. His poetry has been published widely in journals such as *Poetry*, *Harper's*, *The Georgia Review*, and the *Gettysburg Review*. He has received numerous honors including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a Breadloaf Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, and a Georgia Author of the Year honor. He is the only Georgia writer to twice receive the Townsend Prize for Fiction. When referring to his work, reviewers and readers frequently use these words: elegant and eloquent, humorous and intelligent, intensely felt, spare, and elegiac.



Mitcham was not formally trained as a writer, but rather received his undergraduate and PhD degrees in psychology from the University of Georgia. He spent thirty years teaching psychology at Fort Valley State University, a position from which he retired in 2004. He currently teaches creative writing at Mercer University in Macon.

How have libraries—and your use of libraries—informed or inspired your writing over the years?

When I first began to attempt the writing of poems, my primary teacher was the library, actually several libraries. The main one was the Stetson Library at Mercer University, but also

the libraries at the University of Georgia, Emory University, and Fort Valley State University, as well as the Washington Public Library in Macon.

I spent many hours reading literary periodicals in these places, trying to understand why certain poems were thought to be good. I would look through the current issues, then go into the stacks for the bound volumes. I also read poetry collections and books of interviews. I read all of the *Paris Review* interviews at the Stetson Library.

Is there a specific poem you've written that has a special connection to libraries or to library collections?

Perhaps you researched your subject at a nearby public or university library? How might you have incorporated your research into the poem?

"Surviving in Tolstoy's Dream," from *Somewhere in Ecclesiastes*, is a poem set in a library. It owes something to John Gardner's idea that a work of fiction should draw the reader into a vivid and continuous dream.

How do you think libraries, especially libraries in Georgia, have helped to promote your work and to create new audiences for your readings and workshops?

I've given readings at libraries around the state, and I've held residencies, such as the one I held almost 30 years ago at the Brunswick-Glynn County Regional Library. Libraries are vitally important for the promotion of literary culture in any community.

In what additional ways might libraries support aspiring writers and promote their works?

I suppose the best way would be by routinely purchasing poetry collections given good reviews by trusted sources. Good poetry collections in bookstores are increasingly rare, as are the bookstores. Libraries that are open to hosting literary events also provide a great service.

Do you have fond memories of a particular library (or libraries) that you'd care to share?

When I first went to the University of Georgia as an undergraduate, I sort of fell under the spell of the main library. It seemed vast to me. I spent a lot of time studying there, as well as just looking around. Later, when I'd take my young son to football games at UGA, we'd wait out the traffic after the game in the library, and that's a good memory, too.

These days, I spend quite a bit of time in my carrel at Mercer's Tarver Library, writing poems or working on my novel. It's an ideal location to write, especially in the summer—a cool, quiet room in a place that says, by its very existence, that the written word matters. I have only to step outside my carrel to be encouraged and humbled and challenged. I feel it every time I'm there, whether my writing has gone well that day or not.

There's a spiritual aspect to a library that can't be denied. To walk through the stacks is to pass by many, many examined lives that have been given voice but are now silent, unless one should open one of the books and bring that voice back to life. To me, this has always seemed, and still seems, profound.

You have had the opportunity to teach creative writing at several colleges and universities including UGA, Emory, and Mercer. What advice would you give to your students concerning libraries and how best to utilize them?

Put down the demonic little devices that now bring you almost all your information (miraculously, I admit) and spend hours

wandering through some good library, reading things you were not searching for, finding things you did not set out to find. Pull books off shelves at random. This may not be the best way to utilize a library, but it's a valuable practice. A more structured practice that I recommend is to read every literary periodical held by a library. I also recommend finding and reading bound collections of periodicals no longer taken by the library. There are likely to be many of these.

As the new state Poet Laureate of Georgia, are you planning any new initiatives to promote the work of other fine state poets or to cultivate a larger readership for poetry? How might libraries play a part in those plans?

I am working with the Georgia Council for the Arts on several projects to showcase the many excellent poets who live in Georgia. We're still in the planning stages, but one of our objectives is to bring poetry to communities that are not home to an institution of higher learning. We will be involving local libraries and arts councils in these efforts.

Can you say more about your current writing projects?

My long-term poetry project is an oblique lexicon—a collection of poems which are narrative or discursive riffs moving at an angle to their one-word titles, attempting to discover some truth slantwise, as Emily Dickinson advised us to do. When the collection is done, the lexicon will be presented out of sequence, so that it might achieve a shape of its own, and there will be multiple entries for a single word, but these will appear at different places in the collection. I've also been working on a novel for about a year.

Cheryl Stiles is Associate Professor of Library Science and Coordinator of Graduate Instruction at Kennesaw State University

Surviving in Tolstoy's Dream

By Judson Mitcham

He tucks past the desk, smelling foul, like spoiled onion,
and, as always, of alcohol. What he wants
since winter turned hard weeks back,
he finds right here—a place to sit where it's warm,
a bathroom anyone can use, clean water,
a trash can next to a vending machine
in the basement, and more. Other bums don't make it.
Bones wanting softness, they will flop onto sofas
which line the walls holding current magazines,
leafing through what they have grabbed, maybe *Life*,
Ebony, or *Better Homes and Gardens*. In a wink,
mouths fall slack, hands surrender, and the slick
picture books slip from their laps.
No sleeping allowed, they are ushered out.
But the man I follow, looking up from the cards,
veers toward someplace else. I would bet
his story is flawed by a flatness inside,
by the rambling, sad chapters on job, wife and blood,
jail and children, alley and rain. I have seen
how bare his eyes are, no different from the others',
as if burned clean of memory by enough
alcohol or scoured of what they've known
by a wind which returns any dawn, eager to pin
trash like last week's classifieds against
a sharp ledge or a charged fence. When he limps
from the last rank of fiction,
he takes off his camouflage Army coat, carefully
lays it over the back of a straight chair
at the table he's chosen, then frees three buttons
of his outer shirt, peels off a layer of flannel,
jabs shirttails into bottle-smooth corduroys, walks
to a fountain on the far wall, guarding his book
like a pint full of Thunderbird, something which no one
would leave unattended. When he sits, grandly,
as if coming to a fine, free meal, he cracks the novel
to its heart, starts to read, lips moving, and as easily
as swilling any day's first drink, enters the dream.