

Interview with Shann Ray

Keya Mitra, Mikelyn Rochford & Kyle Southard



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Shann Ray grew up in Montana and spent part of his childhood on the Northern Cheyenne reservation. His work has been featured in *Poetry*, *Narrative*, *Esquire*, *McSweeney's*, *Poetry International*, *Northwest Review* and *Salon*. Named a finalist with Ted Kooser's *Splitting an Order* and Erin Belieu's *Slant Six*, Ray's debut book of poems, *Balefire*, won the High Plains Book Award in poetry. A National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellow, he is the winner of the American

Book Award, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize, the High Plains Book Award in both poetry and fiction, the Western Writers of America Spur Award, the Foreword Book of the Year Readers' Choice Award, the Subterranean Poetry Prize, the Ruminant Short Story Prize, the Crab Creek Review Fiction Award, the Pacific Northwest Inlander Short Story Prize, and the Poetry Quarterly Poetry Prize. Ray is the author of *Balefire: Poems* (Lost Horse), *American Masculine: Stories* (Graywolf), *American Copper: A Novel* (Unbridled), and a book of political theory, *Forgiveness and Power in the Age of Atrocity* (Rowman & Littlefield). He was a member of a group educational Fulbright Grant to South Africa, and a United Nations Sustainable Development Grant titled *Intercultural Dialogues through Beauty as a Language of Peace*. Shann has also served as a research psychologist for the Centers for Disease Control, a panelist for the National Endowment for the Humanities, and as a visiting scholar in Asia, Africa, Europe, and South America. He teaches leadership and forgiveness studies at Gonzaga University.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: Can you tell us about your background in writing?

Shann: When I'm on a project, I write every day. When I'm not on a project, I'm enjoying the intimacy of other writers: listening to writers, reading their books, loving what they're doing. There is a lot of cross pollination that's happening right now. Some of it involves watching basketball games and finding beauty in other forms. In between projects, it's a lot of cross-pollination.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: Do you play basketball every day?

Shann: I play five days a week, on occasion with Sherman Alexie and Jess Walter. It's a great group of brothers. There's a lot of kindness and ideas generated between those brothers.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: Can you talk about how basketball impacts your writing?

Shann: I did write an essay recently in *Lit Hub* called "Love, Light and Basketball on the Reservation," and Jess Walter and I collaborated on an essay for *Tin House* in preparation for the opening of March Madness. There's been a lot of conversation about basketball with Jess Walter. He brought up that in basketball you have a lot of different styles, like in life. You have robotic players and elegant players and players who operate with brute force. We talked about the nature of grace in basketball. My daughters are all dancers. It's a balance of love and power, which is incredibly important philosophically for writers.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: Can you say more about grace and power?

Shann: The deepest philosophies of cultures are latent beneath the art of those cultures. In America, we see histories of genocide alongside those of atonement and forgiveness. Outside influences are important, so if we are writing about American literature we need to understand that it intersects with these other cultures.

I am stunned by writers who have a global understanding. I've been reading Jim Harrison, who recently passed away, and I can't believe how much goes into a work like his novella *Legends of the Fall*. When you go back and look at his life, you

realize that he's read so many works. He had a huge foundation and a massive life that he lived that allowed him to write in such a distinctive way. The novella travels between Mexico and America, from America to France.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: Can you talk more about your inspirations?

Shann: Some of the authors that I'm thrilled with right now: C.D. Wright. *One With Others* and *Deepstep Come Shining* are gorgeous. I'm always interested in deep loss and sorrow. James Welch is a wonderful Montana Writer. I try to read everything by Toni Morrison and also listen to interviews by her. Sherman Alexie's book of interviews is pure, raw critical race theory.

Speaking of race theory, our current presidential moment is painful for artists. It is painful for artists, but this has been cyclical for years. This is a time when serving people's greater health is more humane and profound. I also think it's important to understand our moment. Why is racism in America so pervasive?

We look at the acts of genocide that have been committed and we ask the question of how countries contend with us to understand the questions surrounding genocide. It is important for us to understand our countries and histories. We need to trace back to our backgrounds. I have a Czech and German background, and recent history has shown aggressive genocide between the Czech and Germans. Friends have led me in subtle ways that are great: Toni Morrison leads us that way. *Between the World and Me* and *Citizen* contain deep love. I'm inspired by bell hooks and Angela Davis and Frederick Douglass. Martin Luther King and James Baldwin's works

are centered on atonement and forgiveness. It's important to understand the dominant cultures and to realize that the non-dominant cultures provide a place of healing.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: So you feel that the dominant culture is not where love comes from?

Shann: Deep art will not come from a dominant culture because it doesn't allow for a narrative of atonement and forgiveness. That is the great place of American and world art.

In my own background, the Czech Republic has authors like Milan Kundera, Katerina Rudcenkova, and Vaclav Havel. They are all visions. I like to ask the questions about how violence is influenced by ultimate forgiveness.

After the massacres in Czechoslovakia came the garden of peace and friendship. The Czech Republic asked the children of Germany to join with the children of Czechoslovakia to plant roses together in the Garden of Peace and Friendship in New Lidice. My own work has been in forgiveness research and atonement research.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: How did your experience living in Germany translate into your experience with writing?

Shann: I did live in Germany for a while with Jen (my wife)—it was helpful to be there for sure. I believe that living inside other cultures is vital. Languages are difficult to learn. It's great as an artist to live in other cultures. It has shaped me to live in Germany. I've had visiting writer appointments in Colombia, the Philippines, South Africa. You get changed and shaped by living abroad.

Kyle, Mikelyn, and Kyle: You were once a professional basketball player. How did you start writing?

Shann: My wife Jennifer was always a reader. I always admired her fire; she is a fiercely passionate person. My inner life called out to me when I was in her presence; I wanted to be around her, be like her, understand her. Initially we read a book called *A Severe Mercy*. It was an intentional expression of love, which integrates the German and Czech. What are the best expressions of love? I'm game for free flow—I've jumped off some cliffs, done sky-diving, but you should get some mentoring. I've always felt that with editors that if they want to change something it is healthy to hear other's perspectives. This book has great insights—if another person loves something, it is worthy of deep investment. In the book, his wife loved gardening. She was the main gardener, but he took gardening classes. He was a sailor, and she took sailing classes with him.

We also talked about reading the top books that influenced your life. I got good grades, but mostly out of fear because my dad was a principal. I wasn't a big reader back then, so I brought up my top seven to Jen, and she'd read all of them already. Her top Ten were *War and Peace*, *Candide*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, etc.

After that, I fell in love with reading and realized that this is an entire universe I've been missing. It was a feeling of depth and soul and legitimate life.

Then we got married and we went to Germany. At night Jennifer played music, and we read. I realized that if Jen and I had to rely on my income as a writer, we wouldn't make it. Jen and I had both worked with the homeless in LA when I was going to Pepperdine, and I thought writing was too frivolous when people in the streets need food, love, and affection.

So instead I moved towards psychology to work with families about ultimate forgiveness in the face of harm. Not false forgiveness, but genuine change in which people spend 3-5 years changing their cycle of abuse. All of these things are underground psychology movements used around the world. Forgiveness studies is relatively new to psychology.

The impact of forgiveness on health is substantial—people capable of forgiveness have stronger immune systems and better health over all. I was always attracted to that whole bridge.

All that to bring us to writing. I wasn't doing creative writing. I read books on writing and was writing short stories made up of animals and wildflowers for my clients and the abuse cycle.

One of my colleagues had done an MFA. I thought—what's that? Who's that? That started it, and finally I realized that I liked to write and had been writing for a number of years. I thought "These stories are terrible, and I need real mentoring." I applied and got in to Eastern Washington's MFA program. I was chairing the Leadership Studies program at Gonzaga and decided to take several years to finish the MFA.

I was pained by the fact that many writers are not great teachers. In my opinion, it is rare when you find a great writer who is also a great teacher. You shouldn't hire someone to teach at a writing program because they have great books; you should work with people who have great books but are also wonderful professors.

I was planning on taking ten years to finish my MFA, but I was told that the program had a six-year limit. I loved poetry and fiction, so I asked that the director if I could pursue both poetry and fiction. They let me do the dual theses.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: You were working on your MFA while being a professor? How was that?

Shann: It was challenging—I also had three kids at the time—but also beautiful. I found out how much I love poets and writers. It was also hard to feel the pressure of being published and well-received.

I love ten year projects. Wait inside the discipline of great art. You can publish a crappy book in a minute sometimes. There is a certain amount of Christian literature that will die immediately when those books go into printing. The body of art is a combination of elegance and grace and ferocity.

That is why MFA degrees are so important. You can't come out of there without knowing that your art has to be at a very high level.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: Can you talk about your desire to represent Montana in a unique way?

Shann: I wanted to represent wilderness and skies. Some want to embrace the wilderness and are willing to die in the wilderness. The Northern Cheyenne stance is that nature is a creator. I love questions about the nature of intimacy and tenderness. I think it is awesome that no one can control that. No school can control us. Wilderness, or creation, or the creative essence we sometimes name as God is beyond us and filled with fascination and dread.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: Do you feel your writing embodies that absence of control?

Shann: One hope for me is that it embodies something against foreclosure and for intimacy. A lot of the writers I love have an understanding of love and awe and fate. Everyone

recognizes this and no one can control it. Czeslaw Milosz in *The Witness of Poetry* explores that lack of control. You can foreclose on it with an overly calcified atheism or religion.

A lot of people end up not trying to control it. Apathy manifests itself in hypercapitalism, egoism, oversexualization, too much violence, etc.

Keya, Mikelyn, and Kyle: Can you talk about how being a minority on the Cheyenne reservation impacted your writing of *American Copper*?

Shann: Northern cultures tend to be cold, dominant, ego-driven. Those clash with the Cheyenne's matriarchal, circular, intimacy-oriented culture. I was young and just going into a culture. I was a complete oddball, a shining white thing in a brown place. That shining whiteness was not good. But, almost immediately, I felt this brotherhood that poured in. We all still feel like we are deeply in one another's hearts. Those brotherhoods are central to my life for sure. That, and the impact of what I received. Their culture consciously or unconsciously brought about an exchange of life. My dad was a basketball coach, and when the team went to a state tournament, families gave the players headdresses to wear for warm-ups to honor them.

What we experienced with the families was unconditional love, forgiveness, and kindness. I experienced a culture of profound atonement through friendship. That is one of the central themes of *American Copper*. The novel covers a massacre but also delves into a kind of brotherhood and sisterhood that honors race and transcends genocide.