

Interview with Mark Lindensmith

Interviewer: Unknown

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Mark Lindensmith is a native of St. Joseph, Missouri, and lives and works in Virginia, where he is a lawyer and, sometimes, a writer. He and his wife, Gaytha, have six adult children. He is the author of the short story collection, *Short-Term Losses* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1996), and his fiction has appeared in journals such as *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Hook*, the *South Dakota Review*, *New Letters*, *Thema*, and *Wind Magazine*. He was the 2005 winner of the *Chicago Literary Award* for short fiction. He has also published legal articles in several magazines and books. Lindensmith has been a resident fellow in fiction writing at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and he has been the recipient of a grant from the Virginia Commission for the Arts for a novel-in-progress.

Q: How long have you been writing?

A: I've been writing since 1986, off and on. Until then, I'd thought about it a lot, but I started writing in earnest about then. So, by about 1988 or 1989, I had a few stories to start sending out to publications.

Q: While attaining a law degree did, you have any schooling in creative writing?

A: The only schooling I've had in creative writing was a fiction-writing workshop that I took back in the fall of 1986 at the University of Virginia. A writer (a graduate student in the MFA program there) named Carol Forsberg was teaching the class, and I had some free time, so I took the class. We turned in a few scraps of stories, conducted workshops on some of them, and that was about it. Mostly, I've just always been a reader -- at least since college. Not so much in high school. And for some reason I've just always liked to write things, to try to organize this otherwise somewhat chaotic journey through life into something on paper -- something that makes sense. And I took a lot of English and literature classes in school. It's just something I enjoyed, even though I was a political science major and then went to law school.

Q: With your background in law and political science, what is it that has drawn you to write literary fiction?

A: In one of Roberto Unger's books, maybe *Law in Modern Society* from back in the 70s, he talks about the innermost secrets of society, and he says: a society's laws reveal the innermost secrets about the way it holds men together. So, in a way, I suppose I was drawn to politics and law in the same way that I've been drawn to literary fiction and writing fiction over the years-- I'm interested in the inner-most secrets of things. The way a society or a family works, the ways they are held together or come flying apart. And, what makes the individual within the social construct tick? What holds him or her together? How will he or she act when certain pressures are brought to bear? I've just been interested in the inner-workings of people and social institutions, and I'm constantly struck by the idea that what's going on the inside is seldom manifested plainly on the outside. So, I end up brooding and speculating about what's going on underneath. There's nothing new in any of this, and I guess this is what most writers do: they watch people, they are intrigued by some scene or snippet of conversation or odd event, and then they go about speculating, trying to empathize with the characters they become fascinated with, and wonder (on paper) how things came to be the way they are with these people. Here's a young couple on a journey through Kansas on their way to do something, on their way to somewhere. What brought them here? What are their intentions? What if something happens that throws down an obstacle in their way? And there you have the genesis of a story, and if you try hard enough to put yourself into

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those characters and to put on paper something that is true about them, then maybe you have literary fiction. I'm always reminded of what George Garrett said one time about fiction (and here, I think he was talking about literary fiction): That it's a pack of lies, loaded with lots of truth.

Q: As a parent several times over and a practicing lawyer, how were you able to create time to write?

A: Yes, well. Finding time to write is a problem for everybody who wants to write, I suppose. When I first started writing back in the 80s, we had six kids, five of whom were all under two years old (we had quadruplets in 1984), and to tell you the truth, it was easier to find time to write then, when they were little. I could get up at five and put in a couple of hours of writing before going to the office, maybe put in a couple hours on a Sunday afternoon during nap time. Later, when they were all in elementary and high school, with soccer and basketball games, and piano recitals, and band concerts, and all the stuff that you run to constantly with growing kids, it got much harder to find time. I could go for months and years without writing. Then, I'd get obsessed with some story and crank it out. I was able to complete two novels, though, (still looking for a publishing home, by the way, if anyone's interested), and I'm working on a third now – now that the kids are mostly all up and gone to colleges or beyond. Now, I've had some more time to get back into the writing. Mostly, though, I've had time for a few short stories here and there, because ... Well, because they're short. They don't take as long as novels.

Q: UVA has an outstanding creative writing program. How did your time there influence your writing?

A: Yes, UV A does have an outstanding MFA creative writing program, and I wish I could say that I was involved in it, but I wasn't. I just took a one-semester undergraduate level fiction writing course that was taught by one of the MFA students there. So, I can't say that that the program influenced me much, except that I know a few folks who went through the MFA program at Virginia, and they encouraged me in my own writing when I first started. They were kind enough not laugh when I shared some of my work with them, and they gave me helpful suggestions. And John Casey and George Garrett, both of whom used to teach in the MFA program, were encouraging early on, as was Les Whipp, who used to teach at the University of Nebraska.

Q: Considering story length, stories such as another one of your award-winning stories "My Vision" has the subject matter that would often be fuel for a novel or novella. What forms your decision to write it as a short story?

A: Sometimes bits and pieces of a novel make nicely framed, self-contained short stories. And I suppose a number of my stories have enough stuff going on in them that they could be expanded into novels. I've had several people tell me that over the years -- that I had enough crammed into one story that it could be a novel. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. Maybe the short stories are overly busy, or maybe I just need to keep going, expanding them to something longer. But mostly, a piece becomes a short story when it's still relatively short and I come to the end of it. That's really the trick, or the art of the short story, if you will, as far as I'm concerned: endings. It's hard to end something well, I think. The story you mentioned, "My Visions," is a little unusual in that I put it together fairly quickly from a couple of longer pieces I was working on down at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts a few years ago. I was going to give a reading there, and I didn't really have anything ready that seemed short enough. I didn't want to torture the other resident artists with an after-dinner reading that went on for 20 pages or

more, so "My Visions" became this shorter amalgam of a couple of longer pieces that seemed to end nicely where it did, and so, there it was. I liked the ending, so that's where it ended, and it was short, so it was a short story. After the reading, I really didn't do much with the story, but then it fit nicely into the word count requirement for a prize competition last year.

Q: You have written two novels that you are shopping around, what should we know about them?

A: Well, the first one, *Failing to Close*, is basically an expanded version of one of the stories from my 1996 short story collection, and it's about this slightly crazed law professor who is trying to come to grips with the deaths of his brother and parents in two separate accidents, and who is also trying to sell the old family home. But he's not trying very hard to sell it, and he ends up in conflict with a family who wants to buy the house, and, so, that's where the title comes from. He's failing to close on the sale of the house, and he is failing to come to any kind of closure or relief from the deaths. It's told in the form of letters that the survivor writes to the dead brother on his computer, and the letters dovetail with other, more traditional narrative sections. This was my first attempt at the novel form and length, and, although it won a generous grant from the Virginia Commission for the Arts and was a finalist and semi-finalist in a couple of competitions, it just never got picked up by a publisher. An agent tried for maybe about three to six months to sell it to some of the major houses back in 1996 or 1997, then I decided to do some more work on it, and then the agent left the business, and then ... well, and then it sat in drawer for a long time while I wrote another novel and helped rear our kids, and worked, and wrote a few stories here and there. The second novel, *The Haydn Bushes*, is a better novel, I think, and is about this slightly crazed playwright (note the slightly crazed theme again) and several other main characters who, owing to a confluence of factors, end up converging during the second half of the novel at an artist colony in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee, where strange things are happening and where the family who runs the colony is being harassed by a local rightwing radio talk show host, the department of social services, and a dim-witted congressman. Those are the TV Guide summaries, I suppose. But the main thing you should know about them is, novels are really hard. With short stories, a lot of times I can visualize them in my head before I start writing. With novels, it's hard to visualize the whole thing at once, and I'm not really very good at taking notes or pinning up cards, and I can get discouraged easily when I have these characters standing on a sidewalk somewhere talking to each other about something, waiting for the next interesting and true thing to happen, and I don't know what that next interesting and true thing should be.

Q: Your third novel "*Falling to Close*" received a grant from the Virginia Commission for the Arts. How has that affected your approach to your work on it?

A: *Failing to Close* is actually my first novel. I'm working on a third one now, and I plan to go back down to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (VCCA) next week for a little time for intensive work on it. What the grant allowed me to do on the first novel was to let me take a few days off and spend time editing and putting the book in final form. In the end, I guess I would have to say that the main thing the grant did was to boost my confidence in my writing of the novel. A kind of validation -- that several presumably sane, reasonable judges thought it was good enough to warrant a nice grant. I had already had the short story collection taken by SMU Press, so I thought I knew a little something about the short form. But the novel? I didn't really have a good idea. But the grant suggested to me that, yes, maybe I

was coming very close with the novel as well. Maybe I should keep going and keep doing what I was doing.

Q: You have authored a short story collection and also had publishing success in literary journals. Do you approach the two differently?

A: I don't really approach the two differently. A story is a story, and most of the ones in the collection had appeared previously in journals. Just as quick follow up to your question about the difference between sending stories to journals and preparing a collection. Obviously, the stories that journals pick up must resonate in some way with the editors (or interns or whoever gets first crack at them). With a collection, I feel like the stories need to resonate with each other in some way. It's a hard thing to put your finger on, but when selecting the stories for a collection, it seems to me that the reader ought to get the sense that, yes, these stories belong together in some (maybe unintelligible) way. Not necessarily a theme, but maybe a combination of theme and tone and voice and rhythm, so that when you read the collection as a whole, it makes sense that it starts with this story, then this story is here, and that it ends with this story. I would hope that other writers and editors make their selections that way, and I guess that's why I like to read short story collections through like a novel, instead of just skipping around and reading stories at random.