

In Conversation with Eric D. Lehman

MJ: One of my favorite aspects of your short story, "The Day on Which the Days Depend," was your description and design of Nature, and how it impacted the characters, specifically, Harris. Does Nature typically play a role in your writing? What did the process look like as you were creating these spaces for the characters to interact with?

EL: Yes, nature is a constant subject in my work, from my memoir of hiking, *Afoot in Connecticut: Journeys in Natural History*, to the anthology I co-edited, *New England Nature*. I often write fiction about places I've actually been, and the idea for this story came after I stayed in that little Quebecois town and hiked up Mont Jacques Cartier in the Chic-Choc mountains. I use my travel notebooks to provide little details and local color that I hope gives a sense of lived reality. If I hadn't taken those notes, I might have forgotten to include how terrible the mosquitoes were!

MJ: You were published in the last issue of, "The Portrait of New England." That issue featured your short story, "The History of Architecture," which dealt with a similar theme of grappling and reflection of the past, just as your story in this issue does. Could you talk about that idea of past versus present with the characters and worlds within those two stories, and where that concept may have sprang up from? Has that been a theme you've explored in your other works?

EL: I write in several different modes, and one of them in historical nonfiction. So the topic of history is certainly on my mind when I turn to fiction, where I often explore the effect of past events and actions on present circumstance and personality. In "The History of Architecture" [Eric's story published in the Second Issue of *Portrait of New England*], I intentionally gave the main character the opposite side of the argument I usually take as a member of the local historical society, that of the needs of the future. And of course the Harris character in "The Day on Which the Days Depend" is someone whose life is not necessarily sympathetic to everyone, both because of the dreadful action he took (or was forced to take, depending on your point of view) and because of the choice he made to flee to the cabin. Exploring characters like these is a way for me to see how the other half lives, so to speak, and hopefully a way for readers to consider their own pasts and choices.

MJ: In your bio, you've mentioned several of your publications, including, New England at 400 and A History of Connecticut Food, so you've written a lot in the realm of academia and research. Does your academic writing sometimes cross into your creative writing, and vice versa? If so, how would you describe that relationship?

EL: That's an interesting question, because I see everything I do as creative writing. I had to unlearn the "academic writing" that I learned to do in graduate school for the most part, in order to make my work accessible to a broader audience. I was told by one particular historian that I wrote "popular" history books. He meant it as an insult, but I took it as a compliment. Meticulous research does not mean that something has to be boring. You mentioned, *A History of Connecticut Food*, and the research that my co-author and I put into that book was incredible. But I don't think any reader has ever thought it was anything but a fun book to have in the kitchen or on the coffee table.

MJ: Being that you've researched and studied a lot about New England, what's something that you have discovered in your explorations about the New England Literary Tradition that most people may be unaware of?

EL: Over the past two centuries, New England has kept producing good writers. There is a reason for that. We have a fantastic blend of nature and culture. We have a great support system. We have educated and wealthy readers. We have bookstores, libraries, and archives. We have editors, magazines, and publishers. And we have all these things in incredible numbers, far more than our limited space and population should allow. That is why not only do "famous" authors by the dozens choose to live and work in New England, but the hundreds of less famous but often just as talented writers (like the ones featured in this magazine) thrive here.

MJ: Who would be some of the New England writers and texts that have most influenced you as a writer?

EL: Many of the writers and texts that I love are ones that almost everyone loves. I think Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is a brilliant work of applied philosophy, I think Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* is a vivid and subversive novel, I think Wallace Stevens wrote some of the most fascinating and complicated poetry ever written. But I will mention a few that maybe your readers aren't familiar with, like Marilyn Nelson, whose

poetry books deal with one of my favorite topics that you mentioned above – the messy interaction between past and present. Another author that I love is David K. Leff, whose non-fiction I consider to be some of the best contemporary “New England” writing, like his masterpiece, *The Last Undiscovered Place*. And finally, my favorite poet happens to be my wife, Amy Nawrocki, whose collections like, *Four Blue Eggs*, *Reconnaissance*, and *Mouthbrooders*, I read over and over again. I got lucky there!

MJ: What are you currently reading?

EL: I am working through Louis Menand’s multiple biography, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. I like books about groups of writers – see my answer to question 7.

MJ: Are you currently working on any projects? If so, could you explain the work you are doing? Where can people view your latest short stories and publications?

In 2024, I have a memoir of the writing life coming out from independent New England publisher, Homebound Publications. It is partly about my friends and colleagues in contemporary Connecticut literature, some of whom I mentioned above. It also details many of the vicissitudes of the “author life” that some memoirs of the craft do not. I can’t give away the title yet but look for it in bookstores a year from now.