

STANDING ON Z

“The end of the jetty is like the end of our language. Nothing is ahead but the open sea.”

UNCG's 2018 Senior Research Excellence Award winner is nationally recognized poet Stuart Dischell. The first book by the professor of creative writing, "Good Hope Road," garnered a National Poetry Series honor and was reissued, 25 years later, in Carnegie Mellon Press's Classic Contemporary Series. Subsequent books were published by Penguin and the University of Chicago, two of America's most prestigious literary presses.

Dischell's poems have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *Slate*, *Ploughshares*, and various anthologies, including *The Pushcart Prize* and collections edited by Garrison Keillor and Robert Pinsky. He has received two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships and a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, one of the top honors awarded to American artists. Residencies at Lavigny, Valparaiso, and Sainte-Valière and his many readings at American University of Paris and Paris American Academy testify to his international reputation.

POETRY VS. PROSE

"My preference for poetry over prose has to do with personality and temperament, and also personal history. I came to poetry, like many in my generation, through songwriting. I wanted to be a folk singer, like Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, or Bob Dylan. But I was writing stories and journalism then too.

"Attention Deficit Disorder is probably another reason I wrote more poetry than prose – I was not physically capable, in my teens and twenties, to sit at a desk long enough. It's easy to write poetry. You don't even need a pencil to write it. You can say it in your head. Of course, it is not easy to write poetry well. Both priceless and worthless, it is the most democratic art form."

LA VIE EN ROSE

"Most of my work about Paris is nonfiction, essays on walking the original walls of Paris, although the city has filtered into my poetry over my last two books. I used to resist writing about Paris. I felt I didn't really have a claim on the landscape. But having been there some forty times, that's changed. Paris has always loomed large in my family's story. When my grandparents met in central Europe, my grandmother would only marry my grandfather on the condition that he would take her to live there. They left during the zeppelin attacks on Paris in 1915 to come to America. Growing up, I understood Paris was a place where everything was better. The wind was better, the light was better, the rain was better, and of course the food was, as well.

"In high school, I became enamored with writers of *The Lost Generation*, and I read – and misread terribly – Hemingway's 'A Moveable Feast' and projected myself into a life like that, among other writers living abroad. I actually taught my first class, at twenty years old, on 'The Lost Generation.' When I'm in Paris, standing on a given street corner, I can almost see the layers of history under my feet."

BEAUTY IN ABSURDITY

"I'm not a very self-conscious writer, but I do come to understand what I've done afterwards. I teach a class called 'Now Look at What You Have Done,' in which poets look at the poems they have written and observe the conscious, unconscious, subconscious choices we make in putting our poems together. I look at that as well when I'm revising and restructuring my work. Poet Stanley Plumly once wrote that I'm hard to pin down, I'm part elegist, but part absurdist. And I think, being an absurdist, my stock-in-trade is a mixture of humor and devastating sorrow. Undercutting humor with sorrow and undercutting sorrow with humor. Trying to build something more human and more tense out of the mixtures. I don't believe people are always one way. Maybe it's just me. I've been at funerals where I feared bursting into laughter – even though I was brokenhearted – thinking of some absurd thing the person had done."

POINTS OF PRIDE

"I've received national fellowships and international grants. I've been asked to read and lead workshops in hundreds of places. But I'm most proud of the students I have taught and the books they have published – like Ansel Elkins, who won the Yale Younger Poets Prize, or Maria Hummel, who won the American Poetry Review's Honickman Prize, or Sarah Rose Nordgren, who won the Agnes Lynch Starret Poetry Prize. Jennifer Whitaker – now UNCG faculty – won the Brittingham Prize in Poetry for her book "The Blue Hour." I can't help but be pleased by the number of my former students who have won prestigious awards, but they all, to me, are outstanding."

WIDE OPEN SPACES

"My mother was a painter, an intellectual, a great reader, and she loved poetry. Her family was desperately poor; they were bohemians, kind of. My father was a hard-nosed, self-taught guy – an old-school tough guy. His son being a poet was not exactly in the long-term plan.

"I grew up in a little town just outside of Atlantic City. I grew up right on the beach. The ocean has always been an inspiration in my life, although I do love urban places. A good number of my poems are set on the seashore. Having that open space has always been important to me. Lately it's been the mountains. Just not feeling closed in. That's essential to me. That's why I need to travel. You know that quote from Paul Theroux where he says, 'I have seldom heard a train go by and not wished I was on it?'"

Interview by Mike Harris • Learn more at go.uncg.edu/dischell