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An Interview With Stephen J. West

Stephen J. West is the author of *Soft-Boiled: An Investigation of Masculinity & The Writer's Life*, a book-length essay published by Kelson Books in July of 2022. In describing West's book, Lucas Mann, author of *Captive Audience*, perhaps says it best. He writes, "In tackling a subject as ever-present and fraught as masculinity, it's easy for writers to retreat to the two poles of the conversation: romance or ridicule. All the more remarkable, then, that Stephen J. West dances around that trap, with prose that is wry and funny and skeptical, but also deeply heartfelt and true. *Soft-Boiled* leaves no stone unturned in its investigation of this unified myth of American manhood, and West is a smart, fun, kind-hearted investigator, willing—like Frank Streets, the enigma at the book's center—to let us ride along and see what happens next." In addition to *Soft-Boiled*, West's work can be seen in *Brevity*, *Ninth Letter*, *PANK*, and more. He is also the curator of the Undead Darlings broad-side series. He currently lives in Rochester, NY, where he is a visiting assistant professor of English at St. John Fisher College.

Gandy Dancer: *Soft-Boiled: An Investigation of Masculinity & The Writer's Life* is a book-length essay that encourages leaning into discomfort, and your narrator leads by example from the beginning, defining himself as someone who "blushes over [his] immense privilege" as a straight, white man. Was this vulnerability and self-awareness in your writing something that you struggled to reach, and if so, how did you manage to find this authorial voice?

Stephen J. West: My comfort zone as a writer has always skewed toward self-consciousness and wide-openness on the page. I think this is part of the

reason that as a teenager and college student at SUNY Geneseo, I didn't feel fully comfortable writing poetry and fiction even as I felt a strong desire to write. I hadn't really heard about creative nonfiction at that time, and felt a little lost without a "home" genre. I mean, how can someone call themselves a writer if they don't have a form they are comfortable writing? I would fill notebooks with ideas I had for stories, outlining plots and character conflicts, thinking through metaphor and meaning, and really all of the "ideas" of writing without any of the art.

After I graduated from Geneseo, I went to graduate school for a PhD in English at the University of Iowa. But really the main reason I applied was because of the reputation of their fiction and poetry programs. I think it was a bit of luck that I discovered the Nonfiction Writing Program at Iowa. I was able to take grad workshops in CNF and learn about the essay and, *voilà!* I found a form that fit my instinct for self-consciousness and thinking aloud on the page. I've been leaning into it ever since.

GD: Throughout *Soft-Boiled*, you explore the differences between Frank Streets and your narrator, between a private investigator and a writer, while also honing in on the similarities. At what point in your writing process did you start to make these connections, and how did that inform this book as one that explores masculinity and what it means to be a good man?

SJW: I'm glad you see that the book cares about the work that writers do! I had a feeling early on that the dialogue between a private investigator and an essayist could lead me to explore the ways that writers—particularly in creative nonfiction—pursue the truth of their experiences. After I graduated from Iowa, I was skeptical of how truthful CNF can ever really be. So much of the "truth" of the genre hinges on the trust of the writer-as-narrator. I was suspicious of even my own relationship to truths, how easy it is to manipulate information into outcomes and meanings that I desire as a writer—the tail wagging the dog (I've always hoped to find a time to use this cliché, and here we are!). So, before I even started writing the book, I knew that I was interested in using the context of private investigation as a means to explore the relationship between writer and reader—and writer and self—that is fundamental to the genre.

The masculinity part came later. I came to realize that a project aimed at questioning the core values of creative nonfiction and how it goes about presenting subjective truth could feel too academic, too impersonal, unless I aimed that scrutiny and investigation at myself. After a few encounters with Frank Streets and my awareness of how different he and I are as people—as men—I spent some time drafting meditations on my relationship to masculinity, and then the larger cultural conversation surrounding hegemonic white masculinity became necessary the further into the writing I went.

GD: A large part of the journey in your book seems to revolve around connection with place, and how for so long your narrator “forged an identity in feeling displaced” until he makes a conscious decision to accept where he came from—Western New York. Can you talk more about the way that your perspective on place has changed, and what that means for you as a writer?

SJW: I still think the book could be even more about place. One big craft question I ask in the book is: what responsibility do writers have to the people and places that they present in their work? And this feels even more pressing when talking about creative nonfiction, and a book like *Soft-Boiled* in particular that uses the lives of real people and the places they identify with as an engine for the writer’s self-investigation. Place is a vital marker of identity and culture in Appalachia, and I think writing this book helped me see how important that is to the people that live there. How that place is represented matters, and I’ve been thinking more lately about how even a region like Western New York and its displacement—are we Upstate? Sub-Canadian? Eastern Midwestern?—has meaning to the people that call it home.

GD: In your book, you tell the reader so much about yourself and your inferences about the people whom you speak to, but draw the line at telling your wife K’s story of her vision loss. In your experience, how do you know what is your story to tell and what isn’t?

SJW: I don’t really know which stories are mine to tell and which aren’t! Making inferences is one thing, but the tricky nature of assuming the experience of someone else’s trauma felt like a point worth emphasizing in the book, given the importance I wanted to place on that larger question as it relates to craft. I guess for me the interesting part is the question itself—and I know that is an evasive answer.

GD: How do you deal with the imposter syndrome that you describe feeling in your book, and has that changed since *Soft-Boiled* has been published?

SJW: I wish I had a good answer for how to deal with it, but I don’t. It is so common. I saw a post on social media where someone was saying, “it’s impossible for everyone to have imposter syndrome but it seems like everyone has imposter syndrome,” or something like that. And it does seem so pervasive among writers and artists. I kind of think it is a good thing? Because doesn’t it suggest you are self-critical? And shouldn’t that be good for artists and writers, especially if they are trying to capture something real and truthful about the world? It can go too far of course, but I think some self-scrutiny is a good thing.

GD: Near the end of the book, there is what seems to be a pivotal moment while you are comparing “quiet and quarantined” art in a museum to the street art that you see in Oaxaca, how that street art was “the kind you can

touch.” How does the idea of having art “you can touch” inform this book and the type of artist that you are today?

SJW: Thank you for pointing to this moment! I think it has to do with authenticity. What is an authentic experience with art? I think that “quiet and quarantined art”—art that is finished, archived, respected, hallowed, etc.—feels like an exercise in historicizing. I want art that is an exercise in what is here and now, raw and unfolding.

GD: In *Soft-Boiled*, you discuss the importance of the mundane, of being satisfied with a “small and simple life.” What advice do you have for writers who worry that their lives aren’t interesting enough? Your narrator, for instance, says that he might have “a transcendent moment looking at the time stamp on an ATM receipt.”

SJW: I still worry that my life isn’t interesting enough. I’m convinced that it isn’t. But the essayist in me says that the mind can be just as important as the events of a life when it comes to writing, the thinking and the processing of it. You can aim your mind at just about anything, from the flickering light-bulb to the infinity of the universe, and trace that thinking on the page. How many essays might be written from a meditation on a single ATM receipt?

GD: Lastly, in addition to your writing, you are the curator of the broadside series *Undead Darlings*, which publishes pieces of authors’ works that did not make it to their final drafts. Can you say a bit more about this project, and what inspired you to create it?

SJW: I’ve always been interested in visual art along with writing. I proudly have a BA in studio art from the now defunct SUNY Geneseo Art Program. When I went to Iowa, I continued to take art classes and became really interested in bookbinding and letterpress printing through the University of Iowa Center for the Book. I’ve kept up with my self-education on printing techniques at Flower City Arts Center in Rochester, NY, and that’s where I work on *Undead Darlings*. *Undead Darlings* is a series of broadside editions where I collaborate with authors to come up with print editions that feature selections of text they deleted out of published books—the cuts that hurt the most for them to make. It’s been a rewarding way to use my training in printmaking, build more connections among the literary community, and make pretty material things as a result. You can see some of this work at undeaddarlings.com.