



an interview with thomas montgomery fate

rebecca werner

Tom Montgomery-Fate was widely read across campus this year in anticipation of his appearance as part of the Wordfest series. He has written five books of non-fiction, including his most recent collection of essays *Cabin Fever* about his time spent between a cabin in Michigan and as a professor and father just outside of Chicago all framed by his interaction with Thoreau's works, as well as pieces for The Boston Globe, The Baltimore Sun, National Public Radio, Chicago Public Radio, and many other publications across the country. He graduated from The University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program and from Chicago Theological Seminary. He has a wife and three children, and still travels to his cabin in Southern Michigan. Valpo student Rebecca Werner interviewed him while he was on campus this spring, giving readings and meeting with creative writing classes.

Rebecca Werner: I feel like a lot of people may not have a complete understanding of the creative nonfiction genre. I was wondering if you could talk about what the genre allows you to do and what attracted you to the essay form specifically.

Thomas Montgomery Fate: I view it as applying fictional strategies like creation of character, thematic metaphor, figurative language—all the things you use in fiction—to nonfiction. To me, that's all creative nonfiction is. I first became interested in the essay when I was in undergraduate school and started reading the works of E.B. White and Joan Didion. I saw the essay as this kind of elastic, circular structure that allows for a lot of creativity and tension between the 'I' and the 'eye': you're always looking out at the world and looking at yourself simultaneously. That was attractive to me.

RW: You've probably answered this question a lot, but I was wondering if you could talk about Thoreau's influence on your writing.

TMF: He's someone who had a remarkable capacity to look out at the world and at himself simultaneously. He saw the 'I' as part of the 'eye', so he was able to understand himself as related to the natural world and captured that in *Walden*, *Cape Cod*, and in his journals. You get this sense of the relatedness he captures by constantly going back and forth between self and world. I think

a lot of people in college are attracted to his stubborn resilience and anti-establishment thinking. I read "Civil Disobedience" in my intro to Political Science class in college and I was very involved in Central American solidarity work. I took a lot of strength from his writing and his sense of the social conscious. And then later as I got more interested in environmental writing, I started reading his journals, *Walden*, *Cape Cod*, *The Maine Woods*, and all of his books.

RW: In *Cabin Fever*, your passion for activism comes through very strongly. What role or responsibility do you think a writer has, or should have, in addressing global issues?

TMF: I think there's two ways to think about it. I think there's the artist and the activist. You may be referring to the chapter in the book which deliberates between the two. I think the artist teaches himself and the beholder or the reader how to pay attention to the world and that in itself, from my perspective, is also a political act because attentiveness leads to political action. Activism, however, in terms of taking on particular issues and policies in your work, whether overtly or more indirectly, is also important. I don't think one is more important than the other, or that every writer has to be an activist or push towards activism. I think we need all kinds of writers and I think good art, like good activism, teaches the reader and the beholder how to be more human which is what I see as my task. It's what I'm most interested in.

RW: In terms of your own activism, I was interested in your experience with the die-in. Can you talk about that experience and why you chose to include it in *Cabin Fever*?

TMF: Thoreau was someone who lived on the membrane between activism and artist, and he was trying to decide which mattered more to him. I think he sided with the artist side of things, even though he wrote "Civil Disobedience" and was very involved with

the abolitionist movement. If you read his journals, that was primarily because he understood all people as part of one great whole, one great enterprise. That's what I wanted to explore there, the relationship between the artist and the activist. I've been much more of an activist in earlier days. I change the world by teaching; I don't go to Washington as much as I used to.

RW: And you try to do that through your writing as well.

TMF: And I hope through writing too. That's a means of prompting change.

RW: Besides the environment, what are some of the other issues you're interested in writing about?

TMF: I did a book about the war in Nicaragua and the split of the Catholic church. I've written about the state of Native American culture i.e. impoverishment and alcoholism, and the plight of the Native Americans in modern America. Lately, I've been writing more about environmental issues. I've evolved as a reflection of what is happening in my life. It all interests me. I'm not a specialist.

RW: What drew your attention to the Nicaraguan War?

TMF: In college, I found out that I could go to Nicaragua, so I went there for a summer. When I understood the situation and my Spanish got better, I got very engaged and saw it as representative of other kinds of problems in the world where the United States was forcing its political will on developing countries to a bad end.

RW: In terms of post-college career options for English majors, I'm curious about the relationship between teaching and writing. How has writing influenced your teaching? Or how has teaching influenced your writing?

TMF: It's made me do less of it. [laughter] That's a good question. I think the question inherent in that is "are you a better teacher if you're a writer?" If you do the art you're teaching, does that make you a better teacher? I don't think it necessarily does because I think teaching too is an art. If you're able to use your skill and the craft you have as a writer, or are able to talk about it and teach it in a way that engages your students, then I think it's a really good thing.

RW: This next question is kind of related to education, I guess. I saw that apart from your bachelor's degree in English and your master's in writing, you also have a master's in religion. What do you do with that degree?

TMF: Both of my degrees are almost meaningless unless you're lucky [laughter]. When I was in Nicaragua working on that book about the split in the Catholic church, I got very interested in the relationship between religion and culture in the developing world. That was why I went to this particular seminary, because I wanted to study something called la teología de la liberación, or liberation theology, which is about the relationship between politics and religion generally. That was my connection to it, but I'm also the son of a congregational minister; I've always been interested in religion. It's influenced what I write about. I don't teach anything related to religion now, or theology, but it's useful to me personally. Both of the degrees I got are terminal degrees that don't technically lead to a job. A lot of it's luck and staking a claim as a writer and trying to get your work published.

RW: I came across some references to segments you've done on NPR and the Chicago Public Radio. Can you talk about your involvement with radio in general and the work you do for that?

TMF: One way I have written books and essays is that I started doing these 400-500 word radio essays which tend to be boiled

down stories or snapshots of some experience. The good thing about them is they have a place they start and they have a place that they end and they have a clear thesis or idea. What I've found is that a lot of times the rest of my writing doesn't. [laughter] And so, if I start with that and build it out as an essay, it really helps me. I like reading my work because it really strengthens it. I think reading's important.

RW: Do you still contribute? Have you contributed lately now that the book is finished?

TMF: I do. I think last year I did a couple pieces from the book and I'm going to do some pieces this April because May 6 is the 150th anniversary of Thoreau's death. I mean, who cares?

RW: That's an interesting celebration!

TMF: Well, who cares, other than me, but it's a news peg, so it gives them a reason to have me on. I'd like to do more, I just don't have time. Chicago Public Radio asked me to do a show once, but I just haven't had the time.

RW: I'm always curious to hear about others' writing processes. How do you get yourself in the writing mindset? Do you have any writing rituals?

TMF: I don't have very much time, so the last three books I've written the core (about half of them) during a sabbatical, which is the only time I've had enough focus, energy, and writing time to get something lengthy done. Oftentimes, when my life is going well (right now it's very complicated because my daughter's getting ready to go to college and I've got three kids at home) I like to write early in the morning when I can for several hours. Coffee and quiet.

RW: You mentioned that you did a lot of your writing while on sabbatical. What advice do you have for writers who have to balance either a job or classes? How do you find the time for writing?

TMF: One thing I've done is traded money for time. I've gone to half-time so I can teach less. Another thing is to focus on kinds of writing that fit in smaller compartments like the radio essays. I can complete one in six hours, instead of writing something really long. Fit the kind of writing to the kinds of time you have and then slowly construct something bigger.

RW: What do you hope readers of *Cabin Fever* come away with?

TMF: I hope they see themselves in the book. I hope they feel that when I talk about balance, religion, and nature, they feel like the book is an invitation to them to find themselves in the writing and to process how they deal with some of those issues through my shared experience. That's the hope.

RW: Have you gotten feedback about that?

TMF: I have. Much more on this book than any other. It's been very positive, so I'm hopeful about that.

RW: Where did your passion for writing come from? Did you always want to be a writer?

TMF: I've always liked art. When I began to understand that writing is an art too, and that the writer is using different tools to create the same kind of palette of color and meaning, that's when I started to get more excited about it.

RW: Do you think that's a unique viewpoint?

TMF: Not for literary writers. I teach it that way because I want my students to have some passion about it. A student will come out of my class and know that some sentences sound like popcorn, some sentences sound like a slow moving river. I want them to know that; I want them to hear that in the world, in conversation, and in other places. I don't want them only to process and access information. This distinction between information and meaning is what matters to me and I think that's what the artist sees.

RW: You write a lot about your wife and children in *Cabin Fever* and I was curious how they feel about being cast in a book.

TMF: The first reading I gave was at our public library. They were all there and they brought their friends, so they seemed to be pretty positive. Of course, I invite them to respond to things before they're ever published.

RW: That's probably a good idea.

TMF: Yeah, so they know what's coming. They're not surprised. I need to be sure they're happy with how they're portrayed. One time I did a feature for the Chicago Tribune on parenting, and in it I mentioned that Tessa, my oldest daughter, snored. She thinks it's funny now, but at the time, she was twelve and really worried about what her friends thought. She got really upset with me. I would never have dreamed that she would have even cared about that. So you do have to be sensitive.

RW: I'd love to hear more about the cabin you built with your family and friends. What was that experience like? It must have been a source of personal satisfaction for you.

TMF: It was, but if you read the book carefully, you realize that somebody else framed it in. We did a lot; we laid the foundation and dug the piers. We don't work with our bodies anymore, and

I think that's why Thoreau is attractive to so many people. We're so disconnected from the natural world that anything like this is a great feeling of connection, not accomplishment. When we go to the cabin, the windows look the way they do because of how I cut that wood. I like to know that the floor is still level because of how we dug those holes and poured those piers. If things are a little off, it's because of how we did it. Of course, having your kids get engaged is great too because there's nothing more countercultural today than physical labor.

RW: Were they enthusiastic about it?

TMF: Sometimes. [laughter] When my daughter was twelve, I convinced her and her friends to scrape the back part of our house and paint a quarter of the house. She teases me, "How did you convince me to do that?" I tell her, "Well, I paid you." They actually had a great time.

RW: Where did your love of nature come from?

TMF: I suppose things like that come from your parents and from sensitivity. When I was in seminary, I spent a fair amount of time on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Lakota spirituality and the whole idea of relatedness, that you're a part of all that is, had a big influence on me. And then I started drawing botanical art and seeing differently; when you start seeing differently, you see the complexity and the beauty in the natural world.

RW: What advice do you have for writers?

TMF: Write. [laughter] Talk about writing, share your writing with other folks. Get in a writer's group, search for a voice that you feel comfortable with, so you can hear yourself on the page. Decide for yourself what you want your writing to do. What is it that gives you meaning and pleasure as a writer? Are you interested in more issue-oriented writing, or personal essays, or is it lyrical essays? Experiment and try a lot of different kinds of writing.

