

JASMINE BAILEY & MARK WAGENAAR

An Interview with Jane Mead

Jane Mead is the author of three full-length collections of poetry, most recently *The Usable Field* (Alice James Books, 2008). Her previous collections include *The House of Poured-Out Waters* (Illinois, 2001) and *The Lord and the General Din of the World* (Sarabande, 1986), for which she received the Katherine A. Morton Prize in Poetry. Her more recent honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Completion Grant from the Lannan Foundation, and a Whiting Writer's Award. She lives in California, where she manages her family's ranch.

In November 2007, Jane Mead visited the University of Virginia as the Rea Visiting Writer in Poetry. As Rea Visiting Writer, she met one-on-one with MFA poets, delivered a craft talk entitled "Subterranean Homesick Blues': Some Thoughts on the Aesthetics of Contemporary American Poetries," and gave a reading of her poems. It was during this week that we came to know Jane.

The Usable Field, like Jane's previous collections, speaks with urgency. A poet of landscape, Jane explores California's vineyards as well as our interior spaces in such a way as to entangle them inevitably, and her *Field* becomes (over the course of the book) a place perceivably real in physical form and psychic consequence. Because of our respect for her work as both a writer and teacher, we were excited to interview Jane, to continue the conversations begun during her visit to Charlottesville. This interview was conducted via email.

We see the move towards the short, opaque lyric in House of Poured-Out Waters, in poems such as "However" and "What Happens," which seems like a significant departure from the narrative poems that predominated in that collection. Those poems [the short, opaque lyrics] seem to have foreshadowed the direction you chose to go in The Usable Field. Please talk about how this shift towards the lyric has come about in your work, and also any reflection you may have about lyric or narrative modes.

And I think *House of Poured-Out Waters* is more lyrical, less narrative, than my first book—so the movement from narrative to lyric has been a pretty steady, unbroken progression for most of my writing life. Oddly, now that you mention it though, it occurs to me that my childhood attempts at poetry were lyric, not at all narrative.

Well, to get back to your question and frame it within the context of my adult poems, I'd say the evolution toward the lyric reflects the necessary challenges of my interior life. Over the years, I have felt in myself a kind of opening up, a willingness to be less protected, and a desire to let the poems move more intuitively. This is an evolution of body, mind, spirit, heart, everything—how you feel, how you think, and how you receive those thoughts and thinking into your deepest being. And that's the being that makes the poems. When you are lucky.

In your first collection, The Lord and the General Din of the World, family members appear within the poems' narratives. While the term "confessional" feels too loaded and messy to use in a productive way, it seems fair to say that your work has consistently moved away from overt (auto)biography, that the pieces of autobiography in your poems become more muted or are incorporated in a more "slant" way in The House of Poured-Out Waters and even more so in The Usable Field.

Perhaps this is the flip side of the same coin. Perhaps I was able to open into the lyric partly because the pressures of personal history, personal narrative, lifted some, but I think I'm also writing more economically because I've been increasingly drawn to the precision, the leaping, the sense of lightness in the lyric. The lyric allows you to speak out of the moment, though it can bear the weight of a lot of implied narrative.

Who are you reading now, and which writers or books most occupied your imagination when you were working on The Usable Field?

I definitely consider myself in conversation with other contemporary American writers, so while my influences, strong influences even, obviously extend beyond that, the influences that are most immediate, or most easily traced are those of my contemporaries.

While I was writing *The Usable Field*, I felt particularly freed by reading the poems of Jean Valentine, Alessandra Lynch, Larissa Szporluk, Karen Volkman, Ralph Angel, Brian Teare, and Carl Phillips—to name those that first come to mind. Also the new books by Laurie Sheck and Elizabeth Willis. It is hard to believe what a nourishing time this is, how varied the aesthetics, how fruitful the cross-pollinations.

End of excerpt. For the full interview, please see our print issue.