



Jack Bedell

What inspired you to write?

I was given a copy of R.S.Gwynn’s book, *The Drive In*, by a professor in my last semester of undergraduate work. He was kind enough to pull me out into the hall to tell me how awful everything was I was handing in to him for class. The only poetry I had been taught to that point was Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, etc., and my imitations of that must have driven the poor man over the edge. He gave me the book to show me that contemporary poetry could be personal and narrative. Gwynn’s work was formal, but all about family life and stories from east Texas I could relate to. Right away, I realized I didn’t have it in me to be the Cajun William Blake, but I had a million stories to tell about my family and culture. The weekend my professor gave me Gwynn’s book to read I started writing those poems, and I haven’t stopped since.

What was the route to become a University Professor? What are your research specialisms and the best parts of your job?

My plan, my family’s plan, was for me to go to law school after finishing my undergraduate work. Fortunately, I finished my B.A. in December and couldn’t enter law school mid-year. The English Department at my school offered me a paid fellowship to pursue an Masters in their program, and I took it out of lack of anything else to do. Again fortunately, I finished that the following December and had time to kill before entering law school. I was making plans to go on a walkabout around the country when one of my advisors at the university quit suddenly. The department offered me his schedule of classes for the semester. When I saw what the monthly check was going to be, I junked my plans for the walkabout and started teaching college straight away. By the end of that first semester teaching, I was totally devoted to it.

At Southeastern I specialize in contemporary poetry, publishing studies, professional writing, and creative writing. My principal duties are to edit *Louisiana Literature* and direct the Louisiana Literature Press.

Hands down, the best part of my job is showing up every day ready to learn something from my students. They bring such courage into our classes I can’t help but be inspired every minute I’m with them.

What was it like to be poet laureate of Louisiana? What were the highlights of taking on this prestigious role?

It’s an incredible privilege to have served as Louisiana Poet Laureate. I have always seen that role as a call to duty, not an honor of any sort. I have never believed I was worthy of the post because of the quality of my writing. It’s really a matter of it being my turn to do the heavy

Professor Jack Bedell is Director of Creative Writing programs at Louisiana University. He was the Laureate of Louisiana from 2017-19. Jack is one of the Guest Readers for the Deep Time editions with Black Bough. We caught up with him.

lifting of celebrating poetry and the arts in my home state, in honoring and highlighting brilliant voices.

Every chance I got to shine a light on voices here in Louisiana was a highlight to me. Whether it was doing a reading with an established poet in their hometown, or running a workshop for 12-year-olds in a rural school, it was an honor to share the stage with so many talented poets. It’s truly a blessing to have the memories of those voices from my term as laureate.

Where should new readers of your work start?

I’m never comfortable talking about my own work, but if pressed I’d probably suggest starting with *Bone-Hollow, True*, a collection of new and selected work that came out from Texas Review Press in 2013. The collection contains poems from each of my previous books, as well as a set of new poems.

When I was asked by my press to put that book together, I jumped at the chance thinking it would be really cool to go through all the older stuff to pull out what I thought was best. I wound up being miserable doing it, though. I wanted to revise everything, to make it current and new. Reading those older poems, I came to realize I’d been chewing on the same form and content for 25 years, and it really inspired me to shift my whole operation. The next books I published—*Elliptic, Revenant*, and *No Brother, This Storm*—are completely different in focus, and execution, and they never would have come to be if I hadn’t been tasked with putting together *Bone-Hollow, True*.

What 5 Jack Bedell poems should be gifted to a desert island castaway and why?

Lord, my poems would only distract them for 10 minutes. Tops. Then they’d be left to the real beauty: the waves, gulls, and sun!

What attracted you to the role of Guest Reader for the Deep Time edition of Black Bough?

First off, the chance to work with you on *Black Bough*, a project I’ve admired from the get-go, was a dream. Second, to have the issue focus on a writer I feel is as important as any on our planet right now, Robert Macfarlane, was simply too perfect to pass up. Macfarlane’s sense of value, his respect for the living worth of language and of nature, provides so much inspiration at a time when so much is falling apart and seemingly left behind to perish. His books, especially *Underland*, show how important it is to SEE what’s around, between, and below us on this planet. Once we truly see these things, we will work our fingers to the bone to save them.

What were you looking for from submissions to this edition?

I truly hoped writers will tap into Macfarlane’s sense of curiosity, his wonder at the hidden spaces of this world. Deep time exists in those moments of true, full experience. I hope the poems in the two volumes capture those moments, clear and profound.