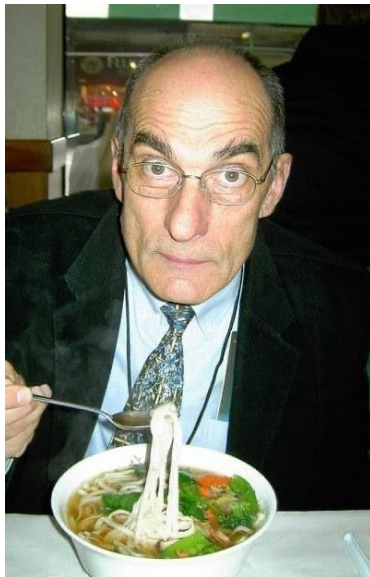


Q9 WITH FEVERS OF THE MIND



Published July 15, 2021
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A Fevers of the Mind Quick-9 Interview with John Guzlowski



Q1: When did you start writing and first influences?

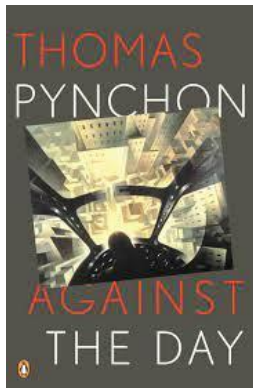
John:

I started writing when I was about 12, but the influences that really got me going were comic books. I still remember the first comic book I ever saw. I was 5 years old. In fact that comic book might have been the first book I ever saw. We were a family of refugees that came to America after WWII. My dad was illiterate and my mom could read some but wasn't interested in reading. There were no books in our house when I was a kid. The first book I saw was that comic book. I was playing at a friend's house and had to go to the bathroom to poop, and I sat down on the toilet and next to the toilet was a stack of comic books. I still remember the cover of that first comic. A zombie or something

like a zombie was coming out of a grave straight at me! I couldn't read at all but I could understand pictures, and I studied every single panel in that comic book story. Eventually, my friend's mom knocked on the door to ask if I was alright. I must have spent a half hour studying that comic book.

That was the start of my love of reading and books and comic books and magazines and everything else with words on it.

Mostly what I read back then was kid's adventure stories and sci fi and comic books of course. And the first writing I did reflected that. I tried to create comic books. My first superhero book was called the Crimson Fire Hydrant about a fire hydrant with super powers.



As I moved into my mid teens and ran into some great high school teachers, I started reading serious fiction: Cervantes and Dostoevsky and Melville and Saul Bellow, and they shaped me a lot. And then college, and my reading turned to the beats and the hip writers. Kerouac and Ginsberg and Brautigan and Thomas Pynchon.

Q2: Who are your biggest influences today?

John:

This may sound odd but it's probably my dad. He was illiterate, never had any kind of schooling, but he was an amazing story teller. He had spent 4 years in a concentration camp, and he could never stop himself from telling stories about what he saw and experienced in the camps. I remember being 6 years old and listening to my dad talk about watching German soldiers cutting off a woman's breasts with a bayonet. And these stories never stopped. When my dad was dying, he came out of a coma to tell me about a friend of his who was executed in Buchenwald Concentration camp. My dad's stories were gruesome and disturbing and sometimes funny and always hopeful. He'd talk of friends getting crucified and turn their stories into stories of hope. Everything I write somehow leads back to my dad.

Q3: Where did you grow up and how did that influence your writing?

John:

Growing up in the immigrant neighborhoods around Humboldt Park in Chicago, I met hardware store clerks with Auschwitz tattoos on their wrists, Polish cavalry officers who still mourned for their dead horses, and women who had walked from Siberia to Iran to escape the Russians. Most of my writing — whether it's about my parents or it's my mystery novel series set in Chicago — owes something to that neighborhood. In fact what got me interested in writing mystery novels was that writing them gave me the chance of revisiting my old neighborhood in my imagination.

Q4: What do you consider your most meaningful work you've done creatively so far?

John:

That's easy. It's the poems and creative non-fiction pieces I've written about my parents and their experiences under the Nazis, most recently in my book Echoes of Tattered Tongues. Sometimes I think that the only reason I'm here on earth is to tell the story of my parents and the millions of people of all races and religions and ethnicities who were considered subhuman by the Germans. I remember one time telling my mom I was going to do a poetry reading of

poems about her and my dad and the camps. My mom said, “Be sure to tell them that we weren’t the only ones in the camps.”

Q5: Any pivotal moment when you knew you wanted to be a writer?

John:

I was 31 years old when I wrote my first poem about my parents. I had no intention of writing about them. I was in grad school, finishing up the work on my PhD in American Lit, and hadn’t written anything creative in 7 years. I was sitting at my desk thinking about Pynchon and Postmodernism and my dissertation when I suddenly started wondering what my parents were thinking. I took out a pen and started writing about what they were thinking about on that hot summer afternoon, and the writing became a poem about how they could never shake off their memories of the camps.

Q6: Favorite activities to relax?

John:

I like to go on twitter and facebook and fish around. I’ve got a lot of writer and artist friends and I’m always checking out what they’re working on. It’s an inspiration. Keeps me focused on writing.

Q7: Any recent or forthcoming projects that you’d like to promote?

John:

I’ve had two books published this year. A novel called *Retreat* — a love story inspired by what happened to my mom when the German soldiers came to her farm, and *The Mad Monk Ikkyu*, a book of poems based on a real life Japanese buddhist poet who was considered mad.

Here are Amazon links: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/>

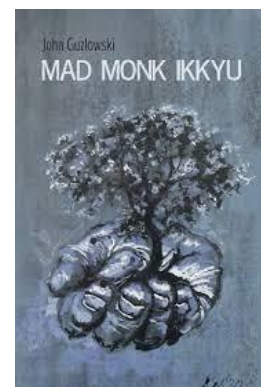
Q8: What is a favorite line/stanza from a poem of yours or others?

John:

My most favorite line is really my most favorite stanza. It’s the last stanza from a poem of mine that Garrison Keillor read on his radio program,

What My Father Believed:

*My father believed life is hard, and we should
help each other. If you see someone
on a cross, his weight pulling him down
and breaking his muscles, you should try*



*to lift him, even if only for a minute,
even though you know lifting won't save him.*

Q9: Who has helped you most with writing?

John:

It's probably my wife. I've been running my poems and my novels and my essays past her for the last 50 years. She's got a PhD in Rhetoric and she really knows her stuff.

Links:

[2 poems inspired by Bukowski by John Guzlowski](#)

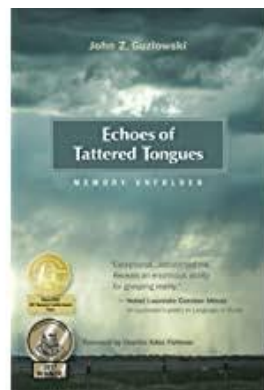
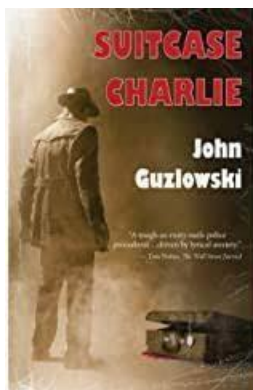
Twitter: @Johnguzlowski

<https://historycooperative.org/journal/lightning-and-ashes-the-poetry-of-john-guzlowski/>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120825165507/http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/pas/65.1/napierkowski.html>

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/mysteries-tales-of-three-blood-soaked-cities-1543616777>

<http://lightning-and-ashes.blogspot.com/>



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