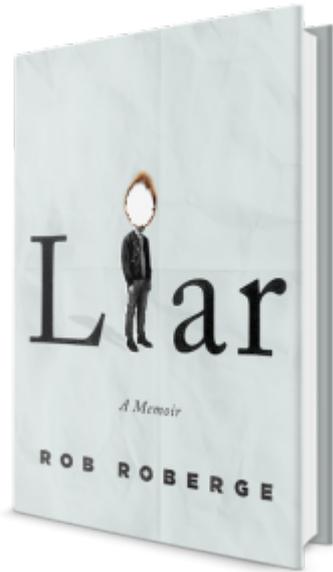


Curtis Smith Interviews Rob Roberge

written by Curtis Smith | March 4, 2016



Curtis Smith: We first met at Vermont College's MFA program in the early 90's. When I look back on those days, I'm struck by all the good writing that has and continues to come out from our classmates. Which leads me to this—when asked what was the program's greatest benefit, I always answer it was the realization that there were talented people from all over the country who would be competing with me for those few slots in lit journals and publishing lists. This still helps me to hold my work to a higher standard.

Can I ask you the same question—what was your take from the program? How might your career be different without the experience?

Rob Roberge: My biggest take from the program was that I would meet the writer who would become the most important mentor to/for my career: Francois Camoin. Before Francois, I had no language for what I was trying to do in fiction. After working with him, it was like I was on my way to finding my literary tribe. I discovered what kind of work I wanted mine to be in a dialog with. He was the most important part of grad school for me. And he became a great friend.

CS: Congratulations on *Liar*. It's just out from Crown and getting a lot of nice words. But most of your previous books have been with indie presses. How would you compare the experiences of working with the bigs and indies?

RR: So far, the biggest difference has been that there's a publicity team working on/for the book. Most indies are labors of love for the people behind them, and then do every job imaginable in the publishing process...from acquiring a book, to editing, to cover design, to publicity. They have to do it all themselves. At the trade houses, everyone has a specific job. That said, each of them has a lot more books they're doing every season. I have no complaints. I've been treated well in both places. The trades probably have the ability to get word out about your book a little better. But it's not for

lack of trying at the indies.

CS: I'm always interested in the journey that takes a fiction writer into the nonfiction realm. Can you tell us how this happened for you? Did the creative process differ from fiction writing? Now that you've done nonfiction, do you think you'll return to fiction with a different lens?

RR: I didn't think a memoir would be any different from a novel. But it proved to be a lot different. I figured the only difference was that it had to be true and not made up. But it was more complex than that. I knew I'd be telling my story. But I hadn't thought of the fact that I'd be telling *other* people's stories as well. And that I owed it to them to be as sensitive, while remaining as honest as possible. I'm not sure it will carry over to the fiction. I guess I'll have to see with the next novel. I'm only 50 pages in, and so far it's a lot different experience from the memoir. It covers five POV, so that's a big difference by itself.

CS: I think much of writing is the continual asking of questions. In fiction, we ask questions of our characters, but in nonfiction, we're forced to ask questions of ourselves. I've found a certain peace in that—a sometimes weird and scary peace but peace nonetheless. During the course of writing *Liar* did you come to any understandings you hadn't considered before?

RR: Wow. Great question. But I'm not certain I came to any understandings about myself as much as I came away with a much greater understanding that the love of a lot of people had pulled me through my years. And that I was a very lucky person. I knew that...but I didn't realize exactly to what extent.

CS: You have a whole other creative outlet with your music. I've always admired musicians and visual artists. How do you compare the creative processes between music and writing? Do you see any common ground? I'm imagining the two could really fuel each other—true? I don't want to go all *Sophie's Choice* on you, but if you had to choose . . .

RR: The music probably fuels the prose a lot more than the prose fuels the music. I'm really interested in the musicality of prose—it's very important to me that the language sing. Music is different. Sometimes you can write a song in five minutes. Which, as you know, is simply impossible in even a short story, let alone a novel.

If I had to choose? I'd take writing. As much I love music, writing is how I process the world. Without it, I think I'd be pretty lost.

CS: You teach in a low-res MFA program, correct? Teaching is its own kind of art. How's that experience been?

RR: I've been teaching writing now for twenty years, and I love it. It is, as you say, a different art form. And I don't think enough people *view* it as an art form. I take it very seriously, while having a lot of fun with it at the same time. My students are great. It's a wonderful experience. The first job I've ever had that I haven't hated-ha!

CS: What's next?

RR: A novel. One that covers fifty years and five POV. Maybe six. I'm not sure about that yet. But my last few novels have been very autobiographical. And then, there was the memoir. I think it's time to write about other people. People with much different backgrounds than mine. I see the memoir as the close of a certain part of my writing career. It's time to try something new. The memoir was something new when I tried it. I think writers should always be looking to do something they've never done before. If you're not risking failure, you're probably not pushing yourself, you know?



Rob Roberge is the author of *LIAR: A MEMOIR* (Crown, 2016), and four books of fiction, most recently *THE COST OF LIVING* (Other Voices Books, 2013). He's core faculty at UCR/Palm Desert's MFA in writing program, and his work has been widely published and anthologized. He also plays guitar and sings with the LA band The Urinals. For more info: robberge.com