



Compass Rose

Literature and Art Journal

Interview with J.D. Scrimgeour

Compass Rose:

As you were developing as a writer, were there any artists you tried to emulate? How did that affect your work?

J.D. Scrimgeour:

When I started writing nonfiction that wasn't academic, I had the example of James Baldwin, his words and his life in my mind often. His essay, *Notes of a Native Son*, is probably my favorite essay from the 20th century. Sometimes when I would try to figure out what I wanted a piece to say, I would ask myself, What would James Baldwin do? For me, Baldwin appeals because he yokes the personal to the social, political, and historical in such compelling ways. And I learned a lot about how to vary syntax and diction from his writing.

CR:

Describe your writing process.

Scrimgeour:

I write a lot of small scraps during the semester when I'm busy teaching (often when I do in-class writing assignments with my students), and then, when I have a break, I type them up, add to them, revise them, rearrange them into essays or poems. The only way this works, of course, is for me to have a general idea for a project so that when I write these scraps, I'm writing toward the larger project.

CR:

*Explain how you deal with criticism. In *Themes for English B* you took inspiration from your students to further the plot.*

Scrimgeour:

I like criticism and am very interested to get it. To have another person engage with my work enough to respond to it whatever the response is stimulating and useful. Of

course, some of it can be so off base as to be useless, but it doesn't bother me, or, at least, it hasn't bothered me yet. If I like what I write, I'm o.k. with other people having their doubts.

CR:

How do you decide when to take inspiration from your surroundings? How does this influence your writing?

Scrimgeour:

I don't decide to be inspired by something, it just happens. And, of course, what inspires us is what we write about.

CR:

What methods do you take to support yourself through your writing?

Scrimgeour:

Well, although I've made some money on writing, I make my living as a teacher. I'm fairly clueless when it comes to selling myself as a writer. I don't have an agent. I've just started making plans to have a website. I admire those who are able to make a living on their writing alone.

CR:

What reactions do you aim to extract from your readers? Do these reactions change when you write different genres?

Scrimgeour:

I just want my readers to contemplate the images that I put before them, they may not add them up in the same way that I do, but I hope that in considering them it will lead them to understand their own lives and communities in new and useful ways.

CR:

What do you want to let people know about your life that is out of the ordinary?

Scrimgeour:

This one stumps me. I'll say that I have a strong desire to travel. I've never left this country, save for a few trips to Canada. I'm certain that more encounters with other cultures can only open up my writing in new, interesting ways.

CR:

How do you decide when your work is done?

Scrimgeour

I feel like a piece is done when I print it up and show it to readers I trust (my wife, my friends, my colleagues, my family). Of course, it is not done at that point, and it undergoes significant revisions, but the act of showing it to someone else is a signal to me that I've made something worth keeping, and I generally have the body of the piece finished at that time.

CR:

What's the strangest thing you've even done to support your writing?

Scrimgeour:

Teach. Teaching is, at its best, always strange.