



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

## An Interview with Poet and Novelist Marlon L. Fick

Christopher Ward

*The following is a conversation with a Fellow for the National Endowment for the Arts in Writing for the United States as well as Mexico (Cona Cultra), Marlon L. Fick. Fick is the author of several books, including translations, volumes of poetry, and short fiction. He is the author of two forthcoming novels from Jaded Ibis Press – the two novels are part of a trilogy with the third underway. The novels, *The Nowhere Man* and *Rhapsody in a Circle* are written against a backdrop of twentieth-century political turmoil in third world countries: *The Congo* (then Zaire), *Nicaragua*, *Mexico*, and *Pakistan*. The story – in two volumes – spans the life of its central character, *Bolivar Collins*, from the Vietnam years to the present war in *Pakistan* and *Afghanistan*. Currently, Marlon L. Fick teaches at Wenzhou Kean University in China. When not in China he resides in Mexico City with his Spanish born wife, *Francisca Esteve*, a painter.*

*The *Nowhere Man* and *Rhapsody in a Circle* chronicle events that tip the scales of fiction in the direction of facts – and vice versa. Although at the heart of both novels lies questions of identity, the potentially futile quest for the soul, the theme of individuality and freedom eventually collides with politics. Fick believes we are prisoners of the body politic; indeed, his protagonist has never asked to participate with Cuba's efforts in the Nicaraguan Civil war – life's circumstances propel the character into tragedy through no sense of heroism on his part. Likewise, in pre-civil war Zaire, random circumstances disrupt any sort of decent life anyone would hope for. Many years later, the protagonist is kidnapped by a drug cartel with connections to the CIA and 'The Industrial Bank of Wall Street' who use him as a pawn in arms and heroin shipments to and from Afghanistan through the port of Karachi in Pakistan. The novels circumnavigate the world, drawing from the author's personal knowledge of their settings and weaving current events into the narrative. The protagonist, for example, becomes friends with Fidel Castro in the first novel; in the second novel, he encounters Hillary Clinton (on precisely the day in 2006 when Senator Clinton arrived in Pakistan). Also, in the second novel, real news reports out of Latin America which link well known banks with cartel business of both the CIA and the Taliban are woven into autobiographical lines. However, the penumbra between fact and fiction remains; the author does not like to speak of the novel as history, except to assert that 'history is a poor word for something for which we have yet to find a better word'.*

Ward: How would you describe your writing to someone who has not read any of your work?

**Fick: I don't suppose I would bother. I get the question often, and I never answer it. I suppose my answer would be to go and read it. But even then I wouldn't discuss it. I much prefer talking about other writers, anyway. Wallace Stevens or Shakespeare. For you, Dr Ward, I will**

tell you what others say about my work. I'm told I write in the overlap between lyric and narrative. I've also been compared to religious writers, although I'm not religious. We humans like to put things in their places, so let's shelve an identity: let's put Fick's work next to Juan de la Cruz or John Donne. They say my poetry is 'mystical'. I don't get that comment. I was born in the United States – we all grew up with the Old Testament deeply embedded in our common cultural narrative. So, some of the work involves probing into the myths that cling to the inner lining of our brains.

Ward: There's a character in your second novel, 'Wayne Williams', a rather unsavoury fellow. We're never sure if he works for a bank on Wall Street or for the CIA or for both. How did you come by this character?

Fick: These types exist. I've met them in the course of my life as a result of some of the jobs I've taken and their locations. 'Williams' in the second novel is an older version of 'Steve' in the first. The spies I've known were usually slick, some even sleazy – always disgustingly clean-cut and all-American. The Oliver North type. Mind you, I think countries have the right to defend themselves in legitimate ways, but that particular line of work doesn't seem to draw from the best.

Ward: Your publisher views your work as 'avant garde' – do you see it that way?

Fick: I think anything we used to call 'literary' nowadays is 'avante garde.' Walter Ong was one of my mentors in my teenage years. I think (I may be wrong) he coined the term 'post-literate' culture. Writing a book that doesn't follow a formula is rather radical these days. I got letters from agents saying just that: 'We love your work, but we're sorry; we represent John Grisham. We don't publish literature anymore.' There are wonderful experiments going on. There's a trend now, perhaps due to constructionist theory, that reality itself is a fiction, so why not make our fiction reflect that? I think Oliver Stone is doing that sort of thing in movies like *JFK*. On another level, *Jaded Ibis* is – I hate this terminology – cutting edge. They're experimenting with immersion novels, novels in which readers treat the novel as a game and become one of the characters. The idea comes from the gaming industry and young English professors are using it in their classes to 'energise' the students. Before the digital age, a novel like *Moby Dick* was already mind-blowing and interactive and energising. I'd rather not speculate on technologies and the novel – I simply don't know enough about it.

Ward: Do you have any personal political agenda you allow to be a part of your book?

Fick: No. Yes. No. I don't know. Chris, the novels can't escape politics and neither can we. Neither volume one or volume two is overtly political, but it is impossible to ignore the vast death toll in Nicaragua. It's hard to swallow the fact that a lunatic like Ronald Reagan could gain so much respect in the United States, but as for that, I've spent most of my life living in the post-colonial wastelands the US inherited from earlier empires. I'm not sure I look at much through American eyes any more. And, living in Mexico for twelve years, it's pretty hard not to be centrist or left of centre when our neighbours to the north have swung so far

right. And it isn't just a Mexican view. My Pakistani friends call the Tea Party 'The American Taliban.' I do see a resemblance. But I am trying to transcend the political and find a separate peace – which is probably why I find it hard to answer the question. I'm still looking for a soul. I should go back and re-read Karl Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. I think it still applies. Also, *The Machine Stops*, by E.M. Forster.

Ward: So, there is a deeper thematic concern in the two novels. Clearly, you include political exposés along the way. The chapter in novel one, 'Hegel's Forgotten Africa,' dismisses the German idealists as well as Karl Marx for having an incredibly limited understanding of the world due in part to a circular and exclusive vocabulary of their own. Allowing the ambiguous word 'history' for a moment, do you have a stand on the post-colonial critique of Mexico?

Fick: I agree with Octavio Paz's 'The Labyrinth of Solitude.' Mexico exemplifies the existential rift that exists among a conquered people. He was often criticised in Mexico for speaking for the middle and upper classes, but I think his views hold true. If you are a non-Mexican living in Mexico, you experience the fractured self in small or big ways every day. 'We are half Spaniard.' 'We hate Spaniards.' 'I want to marry a Spaniard.' The lies of their cultural narrative seep into everything. Take the saying, 'Mi casa es su casa.' Nothing could ever be farther from true. The doors are closed both literally and figuratively – and this is true of even the closest friends, friends we have known for more than a decade.

Ward: Let's return briefly to the second novel, *Rhapsody in a Circle*. If readers would like to read up on the history of the secret intelligence-gathering organisation of Pakistan, is there some source you would recommend?

Fick: The journals *Strafor: Global Intelligence* and *Geopolitical Weekly* are both excellent sources. Actually, I think Pakistan's ISI may be a bit better than our CIA, if 'better' means 'good'. They have all of our high-tech toys courtesy of the United States, but they do a much better job of having people on the ground. They use, and quite effectively, both high tech and low tech. If they want to know something about you or assess whether you are a threat, a nice fellow will knock on your door and insist on having tea. Total stranger. About three or four hundred questions later, he may let you rest from your interrogation. It was like that when Homer's Odysseus encountered that area of the world. The host asks the questions in the name of 'hospitality' but divulges nothing. The guest answers. In that way, a threat can be assessed.

Ward: What are you reading right now? Are there any authors (living or dead) that you would name as influences?

Fick: I'm working with our Chinese students on a collaborative translation project to publish four important modern Chinese poets. Ouyang Jianghe is perhaps one of the hardest. He's too good! It's quite a challenge. It's my job to render the final version from all the variety of versions. Now, influences. I think there are too many to name. I can tell you a few I admire: William Faulkner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez ... Among poets in the United States, Galway

**Kinnell and Robert Bly. Both of these men I consider to be friends, but I'd like to think I'd follow them anywhere – friends or not. Music is an influence. All kinds of music. I think that studying music helps us to become better writers.**

Ward: What was the book that most influenced your life – and why?

**Fick: I don't recall the title because he wrote so many, but when I was five or six, my mother read the poetry of Langston Hughes. I was hooked. Somehow a kid gets it – that a language is physical. My earliest memory and probably my biggest influence was Hughes.**

Ward: Would you call yourself a postcolonialist and why?

**Fick: I'm really sorry to be flip about your question. I'd call myself Marlon. Other than that, I don't have a lot of use for labels. Clearly others are going to call me 'postcolonialist' since my writing doesn't escape the politics (in the broadest sense of the word) that we live in or of which we are prisoners. I'm not a fan of critical theory, even though I've taught the course. Even then I was a bit of a trickster. The students read from Hazard Adam's text,<sup>1</sup> but I also had them read what artists had to say about what they do – Pablo Picasso, Isaac Stern, etc. They have an utterly different way of thinking about art than theorists do, and suppose I have more respect for the artists than for the theorists, particularly when theorists get to thinking they are better than everyone else.**

Ward: Where would you draw the line between modernism and postmodernism? How would you say these novels fit into the evolution of literary trends?

**Fick: When we gave up looking for the 'still point in a moving universe' – isn't that how T.S. Eliot put it in 'The Four Quartets'? Unlike you, I was trained as a modernist. Dirty word, a 'high modernist'. Even among the modernists, there was an awareness of what we now call 'post'. Yeats: 'the centre cannot hold.' Where do my novels fit? I'm not sure I want them to fit. The modernist would say that time will tell. Heidegger's student, Gadamer argued that if the book is a very good book, then it will survive. I doubt that very much. I think that many great and lousy books have gone the way of the rubbish heap. As for the novels fitting into a trend – I certainly hope they do not fit any trend. They probably do, and now I'm going to lose sleep over worrying that my novels are going to fit a trend when all the time I was just trying to be honest with myself and be true to the stories I had to tell and be true to the reader, too. If there is one problem the novels address that is current, it is that a 'fact' may be neither a 'fact' nor 'true'. We only have to turn on Fox News or CNN to know that.**

Ward: Give us three 'Good to Know' facts about you. Be creative. Tell us about your first job, the inspiration for your writing, any fun details that would enliven your page.

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<sup>1</sup>Hazard Adams is author of *Critical Theory Since Plato* (1971, 1992, 2004) and the Byron W. and Alice L Lockwood Professor Emeritus of Humanities at the University of Washington.

Fick: 1) I'm terrible at writing plays. I've written three and I won't show them to anyone because they are terrible. Clearly my calling is for the novel and for poetry. 2) I write quite a lot of songs; I do mean a lot. I started writing music when I was thirteen and I still do. So I have hundreds of songs that very few people have ever heard. But I'm working with a terrific musician and fellow song writer in Mexico City, Sebastian Garrido. He has the good looks that I don't have and we're both talented. I'm hoping his good looks will land us an important gig. Thus far, all our work has been in the studio. The music – his and mine – come out of American folk, rock, country, and jazz all jumbled up together. 3) I'm told that I'm brave. Why – I guess because I grieved but got on with my life after my small daughter and my wife died. I clawed my way out of despair. Years later, I met Francisca Esteve whom you already mentioned is from Spain, and she too had similar losses. We don't take things for granted – especially each other. We'll be running around Barcelona, her home town, in a few months. You can find us there.

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