***SMALL ACREAGES***

*Longlisted for the PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay*

**Questions for Readers of *Small Acreages* to Consider\***

Question 1:In the essay “Lost and Found” Stamper writes that love is more like light than sound. **“It keeps moving through time and space long after it leaves its point of origin, nurturing one generation after another and random folk along its way.”** Do you agree or disagree, and why?

Question 2:Stamper writes in the essay “Our Quilts” **“With their quilts, they had pushed back – as artists have always done – at the ceaseless ordinary, slipped grace into survival.”** Can you think of examples where people you have known have “slipped grace into survival”?

Question 3:In the essay “Family Reunions," Stamper writes **“Ordinary people are extraordinary.”** What does this mean to you? In what way are the ordinary people we meet extraordinary?

Question 4:The burden of maintaining family keepsakes is a theme that runs throughout the collection, but most prominently in “The Dessert Dishes” –– the story of Aunt Nora and her dessert dishes. Is there value in maintaining the physical belongings of a family to be passed down to future generations? If so, what is it?

Question 5:In the essay “I’d Give a Hundred Dollars” Stamper writes **“It’s hard to understand the past, though it trails behind us, shaping even our molecules, pulling us down or lifting us up.”** Do you agree that the past is difficult to understand? In what ways does the past pull us down or lift us up?

Question 6:Stamper writes, **“In time, I would come to understand that home is a place you never leave, that you carry pieces of it with you in your heart, in your memories, wherever you sleep.”** When you think of “home,” do you think of a physical place or is it more a state of mind, a place occupied by memories?

Question 7**:** Food is used throughout the essays to convey unique aspects of a particular place and its culture. What foods define your memories of your “home” or “place.”

Question 8**:** The essay “When God Speaks” ends with these words: **“I have been struck by grace, however, when I was restless and in great pain, have heard the wave of light break into my darkness, and reassured, I have slept, knowing that I am known, that I am not alone as I go on.”** Why do you think Stamper uses the word “heard” regarding the light? Have you had a similar experience in or outside of religious faith?

Question 7:Stamper writes, **“Time has a cruel way of trivializing human existence, losing the records of our ordinary lives to fire or rot or neglect. Sometimes it ignores our brief stories on earth as though we never existed.”** What is a story you would like to save from rot or neglect about the record of your life? Why is this story important?

Question 8: What was your favorite essay in the collection and why?

Questions for readers contributed by Liz Prather – author of *The Confidence to write: A Guide for Overcoming Fear and Developing Identity as a Writer*

**Questions for the Author\***

Question 1: While these essays are largely from your memory, you weave in public history throughout. How much research do you do, both for your public-centered essays and your personal ones?

***Answer:*** *A public history essay such as “Here on Eagle Creek” obviously requires considerable research. Even in the personal family stories, however, I find that research to verify what I thought I already knew – timelines and dates, for example, and relationships and precise locations – not only saves me from embarrassing errors in print but expands and often even alters my understanding of family lore. Research into the larger history contemporary to a family story can provide additional layers of nuance to a simple tale.*

Question 2: In the essay, “Blank Slate,” you say, “Over a half century later, I feel as distant from that young woman of 1967-68 as she did from the girl she had been. I write, I think, to visit them both.” In what way(s) does reading and writing serve as a means of keeping both personal and public history alive***?***

***Answer:*** *It is difficult to separate our personal history from public history since what has happened “out there” has touched, and continues to touch, nearly aspect of our lives. Certainly, extensive reading has been essential in helping me better understand my and my family’s personal journey through time.*

*However, when our personal experience intersects with major communal events, the telling and preservation of our own stories becomes important to society’s understanding of public history. For example, in an older essay not included in SMALL ACREAGES, I re-told a story handed down in my husband’s family. It centers around their rescue of their most valuable possession, their piano, when the 1937 flood of the Ohio River and lower Kentucky River literally washed away their house. Online, I stumbled across journal entries that had been written by a teenage Cincinnati girl during the flood. Her daily observations helped me understand and visualize what my in-laws experienced in a way that the statistics about high water marks had not.*

*It is important, I believe, for ordinary people to record their personal stories of public history. We cannot know who in the future will need or want to read them – to better understand our experience in those extraordinary moments. Historians of all ilk – academic or family keepers – rely on such accounts to know how it was. I have written about our family’s experience on 9/11 and in the 2020 Covid pandemic, for example.*

*However, personal accounts simply about “the way it was” in the culture, in the time and place we lived, are also important to preserve. The essay “A Tobacco Kind of Christmas,” for example, describes my memory of an agrarian way of life that has, within my lifetime, dramatically changed. So, I encourage people to save their own stories because they may be important to someone, sometime, and we can’t rely on others to tell them the way we experienced them – or even to tell our stories at all.*

Question 3: All of your essays tell a particular story or anecdote and extract a larger universal meaning. What is your process of extracting or discovering the universal meaning of a story, like “An April Fool” for example, about a small child’s awareness of adult insecurity while juxtaposing two very different approaches to education through the lives of Miz Zell and Miss Foresee?

***Answer:*** *I always wanted to be a poet – what can I say – LOL. But really, the personal essayist is required to do more than record a vignette – though there is a place for those in other genres of prose. As for process – oh my. I start with a memory of a person or an event or an emotion or – in the case of a humor piece – sometimes a story I have read in the news. The question I ask myself is why a certain memory has lingered in my mind. When I finally understand “why I have remembered it” I can write the story. My “why” may, or may not, have a “universal meaning.” That would be for the reader to decide.*

Question 4: Understated humor makes this collection a success, but humor is hard to write given that what is funny is often subjective. How do you craft your tone to deliver hilarious takes without coming off cliche or, worse, mean-spirited?

***Answer:*** *I grew up with funny people. No, make that witty people because pranks and vulgarity – or for that matter cliché’s – were not the stuff of my father’s and his brothers’ humor. Grounded and stable, they dealt with the absurd they encountered in situations with a gentle wit. The world amused them. So, if the tone of my humor succeeds in my writing – if humor finds itself sneaking into even a serious piece – that is Daddy’s (and the uncles’) influence or as you phrased it their “tone.” From my mother, I simply learned to cope with life’s curveballs with laughter. As she phrased it, “You might as well laugh.”*

*The humor in my writing is often self-deprecating, also, because I believe that is most easily received by readers. They may see themselves in the writer’s situation and feel relieved at finding kinship. Connecting our own experiences with that of others is, after all, one of the primary reasons that we read. Of course, I am also a woman of a certain age – maybe I absorbed self-deprecation from the culture around me. I have never thought “mean-spirited” humor at the personal embarrassment or ridicule of others was funny. To me, it simply isn’t. The exception would be political humor/satire. I can appreciate that, but I couldn’t write it regardless of the intensity of my political point of view.*

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