

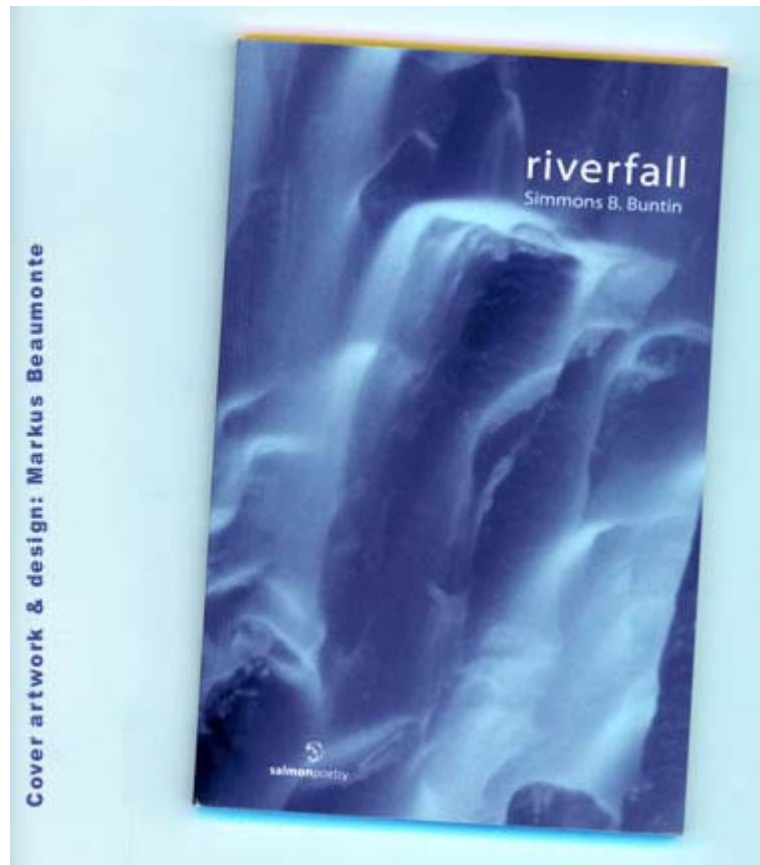
every other day

"The whole thing: just trying to be at home. That's the plot."
— Robin Blaser

1 JULY 06

How has your first book changed your life?

15. **Simmons B. Buntin**



What do you remember about the day when you first saw your finished book?

Not as much as I'm now thinking I should... I remember receiving a package of 20 copies of *Riverfall* via air mail from Ireland. My two initial reactions: 1) the cover design and colors are beautiful (it was designed by a local artist, a former co-worker), and 2) the cover is *shiny*. *Riverfall* has a glossy cover, reflective of the watery design, the collection's title, and I think the nautical nature of many of the poems themselves.

I had reviewed the galleys of the interior pages three separate times during production, so my initial focus was on the cover itself, the quality of the stock, the feel of the book in my welcoming hands.

That evening, I read through the entire book--*my* book--the culmination not only of years of writing poems, but nearly as many

years waiting for the book to be published. All of the waiting now was worth it, as I knew it would be.

How did you happen to be publishing with Salmon? I thought they only published Irish authors.

Salmon Publishing is based in County Clare, Ireland, and is one of Ireland's foremost publishers of poetry, especially poetry by Irish women. But it also has a rich history of publishing American poets like R.T. Smith and Adrienne Rich. Jessie Lendennie, the publisher, is herself American, hailing from Arkansas before moving to Ireland in the early 1980s.

Jessie contacted me after she saw some of my work in *Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built & Natural Environments*. She learned about *Terrain.org*, which I edit and publish, because we had requested a Salmon book to review for a forthcoming issue.

I was surprised and obviously delighted when she requested that I send her a manuscript, as I didn't have a manuscript together and was not considering book publication at all. In fact, when she contacted me in 1999 I had not been seriously writing poetry for four years, as I was in graduate school studying urban and regional planning. Revising and periodically sending out poems, yes, but not writing new poetry.

Initially I sent a joint collection of poetry and prose, which Salmon accepted about a month later. Yet after three years, after Salmon lost funding post-9/11, and after a series of missed publication dates, we mutually agreed that it would be best for me to withdraw the manuscript and try to find another publisher.

I was devastated. But I took the opportunity to tighten up the collection, starting with removing the prose pieces. By this time, I had been writing just a bit more poetry, so reworked the manuscript before sending it out to a handful of stateside book competitions.

About a year later, with no momentum in the contests, I had nearly given up altogether when Jessie sent an email asking if I had any luck finding another publisher. When I replied no, she said, "Then we better take it back." I was cautiously optimistic, letting her know I'd still be delighted for Salmon to publish the book, but that beyond the contract there had to be a real commitment and real publication date from the get-go. Jessie agreed, we set a publication date for spring/summer 2005, and *Riverfall* officially published in May 2005.

Before your book came out, did you imagine your life would change because of it?

Not overwhelmingly. I was originally going to respond, "not significantly," but that's not true. I think it is significant to publish a book, and therefore I did expect my life to change in small but significant ways.

How has your life been different since?

Since publishing--since ramping up for the publishing, really--I've been much more involved in the literary scene, both locally here in Tucson (such as with the University of Arizona's Poetry Center), online through the vast world of poet bloggers, and in other ways, like attending the AWP conference in Austin this year, which I otherwise would not have done. I've always been involved in

literary pursuits because of *Terrain.org*, but never to this extent, and for poetry not with this kind of passion since I wrote most of the poems in the early 1990s.

In a more general--let's say neighborhood--context, being the "author of a book," and apparently any book by a respectable publisher, whatever *that* may be, has certainly piqued the interest of my neighbors, friends, and co-workers. It's another topic for conversation, certainly. A lot of that has to do with how I've marketed the book (see below), since I'm blatant but not obnoxious about promoting *Riverfall*.

And I think--though I hesitate to say this for fear of sounding egotistical--that publishing a book has given me membership in the "book club." Not Oprah's, of course, but in the circle of folks who for better or worse are given more validity and perhaps greater venue because they have a book. That is noticeable, and while it could amount to classism in a way, I think of it more as a reward of publishing.

I'm not sure that Billy Collins, for example, would give a hoot (even though as a poetry whore I did slip him a copy of my book at a reading some months ago), but I did receive a friendly email from Brendan Galvin, following a favorable review in *Shenandoah* recently. Galvin is mentioned in a poem in the book, and has always been a poet whose work I've both admired and aspired to.

Were there things you thought would happen that didn't? Surprises?

I thought it would be easier to set up readings and book signings at local, non-chain bookshops. For example, while I was able to hold a reading and signing at the exceptional bookstore *The Tattered Cover* in Denver, I was not able to set up anything at *Boulder Bookstore*, which I thought would be a lock. The *Boulder Bookstore* is where I spent many weekends perusing its poetry collection--where in fact I first was introduced to Mary Oliver's outstanding *American Primitive*.

I thought it might be easier to place the book for reviews. I was naïve in that capacity, which I admit is surprising because I'm an editor and realize that *Terrain.org* can only review perhaps 10 percent of the books we receive. And yet, I've been pleasantly surprised by the venues that have reviewed or at least mentioned the book, like *Shenandoah* and *Books Ireland*. Still, I'd like to see more reviews (favorable or not, frankly), so keep pushing it out there when I can.

Perhaps the biggest surprise has been the positive and I hope earnest response to *Riverfall* from other poets. Alison Hawthorne Deming, for example, forwarded some very kind words. Bloggers like *Suzanne Frischkorn* and *Scott Edward Anderson* have also been generous in their online (and offline) words. It's difficult if not impossible to be objective when it comes to your own work, so feedback from peers--even and perhaps especially if not positive--helps keep my balance.

What have you been doing to promote the book, and what have those experiences been like for you?

While every poet has to do a lot of his or her own legwork in promoting a book published by a small press, given my publisher is in Ireland and uses Dufour Editions for its North American distribution, I had no promotion assistance or funding provided by the publisher.

Fortunately for me, I'm not shy about promoting *Riverfall*. I've worked in marketing for many years, and as a web program manager (my paying gig), have plenty of experience promoting products both on- and offline. Well before publication, I built the book's website at www.riverfall.com, which contains everything from a PDF-based flyer to an events calendar to sample poems. Once Salmon's [online bookshop](#) appeared, I linked to that so visitors could purchase the book.

Prior to publication I also set up as many readings as I could, with a two-pronged approach: 1) Local readings, since I live in Tucson, and 2) Colorado-based readings, since I wrote most of the poems when living in Colorado, received a Colorado Artists Fellowship for Poetry in 2000, and had more name recognition there than here in Tucson.

I set up a fall "book tour" across Colorado, taking the family along and making a vacation out of the trip. I had to return three months later for The Tattered Cover reading, since the bookstore couldn't fit me in when I was up there, but that extra trip was well worth it for the exposure and the honor of reading at such a great venue with Lois Beebe Hayna. During the first road trip, I took advantage of fellow poet and Auburn University undergrad [Jake Adam York](#) to help set up a reading at the University of Colorado at Denver. Other readings included cafes, a new age bookstore in the mountains where the owner forgot I was coming until the day I arrived, a Kindergarten class, and a potluck at the Meeker town library. In some locations I sold books, and in some I didn't. Overall, I didn't sell as many books on that trip as I hoped, but I still had a really fabulous time.

Back at home, I hosted a book launch party at my house. Eighty friends and neighbors turned up and I sold far more books than I expected. I also set up readings at our neighborhood center as part of the community's speaker series (which not coincidentally I facilitate) and at the [University of Arizona Poetry Center](#). I have yet to read at a local bookstore in Tucson--the one instance where I was set up to read, sadly the local independent bookstore closed its doors for good three weeks prior--but I have read at other venues like cafes. I admit I need to be more proactive about reading locally and across the state, but haven't had much luck with bookstores, much to my chagrin.

One of the challenges has been getting books to bookstores. Dufour Editions provides a six-month delay between European and North American publication. So while *Riverfall* originally published in May 2005 (and I began personally selling books then), Amazon.com, for example, did not officially list the book for sale until November. I've stocked local bookshops with my own copies on consignment.

In addition to readings and other public "appearances," the publisher, Dufour, and I have sent numerous review copies to the publications poems in *Riverfall* first appeared in, as well as other review publications, both print and online. While a poem from the collection has yet to appear in *Poetry Daily* or *Verse Daily*, I periodically remind them that one should! I have also sent the obligatory copies to relatives and friends, and unsolicited copies to poets I know and don't know. For example, I sent a copy to Brian Swann, *OnEarth* editor who has commented extensively on but never accepted any of my poetry submissions.

Once the book was available for purchase from the Salmon Publishing website, I sent an email to all of the fellow poets I know, such as those who have published in *Terrain.org*. It wasn't a sales pitch, but rather an announcement. I didn't want to abuse our

relationship; but just as I appreciate hearing their good news, I hoped they would appreciate hearing mine, all the while spreading the news of the book.

Finally, I started a blog, with the goal not of overtly promoting *Riverfall*, but rather of discussing poetry and the environment, posting photographs, and sharing the other myriad things we all use our blogs for. Appropriately, the blog is riverfall.blogspot.com, and of course provides links to the *Riverfall* website.

What advice do you wish someone had given you before your book came out? What was the best advice you got?

Whether I got it or not, the best advice is: Be patient. Be persistent. Promoting a book of poetry is, alas, like any other art business, and requires the requisite networking, marketing, hand-shaking, public appearances, insider trading. That can and should all be done without arrogance, but like submitting poems to journals, it does require a bit of a thick skin. I believe it was fellow poet blogger Eduardo C. Corral who said to me--of my book signing at AWP but it applies everywhere--that no one will stand in line to see you, not until you're a famous poet. And maybe not even then.

What influence has the book's publication had on your subsequent writing?

Just the energy around the forthcoming book was enough to fully launch me back into serious writing. For the first time in years, I carried a pocket-sized notebook and pen with me everywhere I went, filling it with notes, lines of poetry as they came to me, and, to my delight, scribbled drawings from my young daughters. I was also reading a lot more which, as any poet understands, made me want to write more. So from early 2005 through the summer I wrote a number of what I consider finished poems, and have submitted and had some accepted in journals like *The Manhattan Review* and the environmental magazine *Orion*. But since last fall, I haven't had as much opportunity to write--mostly because I took on a number of side jobs that left little time and, I hate to say, even less creativity. Still, as I've always known, the river is there: waiting to be waded again.

And I'd like to mention, too, that my book's publication--and my renewed vigor to write new poetry--have inspired my 8-year-old daughter to write poetry, as well. And I'm amazed at its quality, unconstrained as it is by the rules we all learn in poetry classes at college and elsewhere. She has read with me at a few readings now, and is always a tough act to follow!

How do you feel about the critical response and has it had any effect on your writing?

I feel pretty good about the critical response. I think the reviews have been pretty spot-on with the book's strengths and weaknesses. But those public responses have had little if any impact on my writing overall.

What would have an impact, rather, would be a person or group that I'd share my draft poems with, who could provide critical feedback to help make the poems stronger. Unfortunately, I don't have that community--either local or online.

So, in part to get that kind of group and simply to force myself to write more, I will be attending graduate school once again beginning this fall. This time, however, I'll be pursuing the MFA in

creative writing. Instead of poetry, though, I'm focusing on creative non-fiction. And when I say I'm pursuing the MFA, that's actually not what I'm doing at all. Yes, I'm a part of the MFA program here at the University of Arizona, but I'm not concerned about the degree per se. What I'm interested in is the courses themselves, the community of writers and faculty, the energy of the place and its people, the culmination of what should be a full manuscript, ready for publication when I'm done.

Do you want your life to change?

I suppose I do want my life to change: I want to write more, I want my writing to reach more people, and I want my writing to have an impact--a significant impact--on people's lives, and on the policies of the world. So I not only want my life to change, but I want to change the lives of others. That's not asking too much, eh?

The reason I chose to focus on creative non-fiction rather than poetry is not so much because I already have published a book of poetry and therefore feel I've learned as much in that genre as possible--because I certainly haven't--but rather because I think I can make a bigger impact through non-fiction than through poetry.

Is there something you're doing now that you think will bring about a change that you seek?

I hope that just about everything I'm doing now will bring about that change: entering the MFA program, writing, submitting, continuing to edit *Terrain.org*, reading widely, blogging, thinking holistically, thinking liberally, maintaining compassion, raising my daughters to explore the world, that they too will strive to make a difference.

Do you believe that poetry can create change in the world?

Yes, it already has and to some degree it will continue to create change in the world. Yet while I contend that poetry is the most noble of literary forms, it also has the smallest readership. Even though I think there is a Renaissance of sorts in poetry today--due in no small part to the Internet--the world of poetry writers and readers is nearly one and the same, and it's not very big at that.

That is one of the main reasons I am now pursuing creative non-fiction over poetry. In today's world, non-fiction has a significantly larger impact on the way people think and act than poetry, largely because it has a much wider readership. If my goal, as I've said, is to change the world, and non-fiction reaches more people, then using non-fiction as the tool to change the world makes sense.

Logic aside, however, I think that non-fiction--the creative essay--works best when it is poetic; that in fact the essay as a tool is not so effective without its embedded poetry, even if the line breaks and to some degree the rhythm of poetry themselves are lost. I think of Terry Tempest Williams, Gary Snyder, Linda Hogan, Barry Lopez, David Quammen, and even Ed Abbey--the environmental essayists who have elevated the nature and/or natural history essay to a moving and essential literary art form by infusing it with poetry.

So while poetry can create change in the world, it cannot achieve the scale of change that the world needs. On the other hand, creative non-fiction--and the environmental essay particularly, in my case--can. And it must.

:

A poem from [Riverfall](#) by Simmons B. Buntin:

Thieving

From the wire grass resilience
From the white perch balance
From the short-leaf pine longevity
From the scrub oak emigration
From the scrub jay endeavor
From the ocelot nurturing
From the deerfly persistence
From the hyacinth cleansing
From the dragonfly agility
From the drosophila translucence
From the black bear strength
From the egret nobility
From the aphid appetite
From the striped bass reflection
From the cowbird cunning
From the gopher tortoise domicile
From the vole faith
From the mole vigilance
From the mullet voice
From the whip-o-will song
From the mosquito passion
From the deer caution
From the tick endurance
From the leopard frog camouflage
From the pea fertility
From the blackbird shadow
From the osprey vision
From the nine-lined skink speed
From the crawfish escape
From the owl silence
From the glasswort repetition
From the gar boundary
From the fire ant community
From the lichen prosperity
From the limpet inheritance
From the manatee humor
From the bumblebee humility
From the human theft

...

[read more first-book interviews](#)

...

[eod current](#)
[archives](#)