

A Life of Service:

A Study of Barry Lopez's Relationship with His Readers

Conversations with Barry Lopez, by William E. Tydeman, is a series of interviews between Tydeman and his friend and colleague, Barry Lopez. In the interviews, they discuss different aspects of Lopez's writing, including his motivation to write to help his readers. Lopez tells him that what makes "an authentic story is establishing a moral relationship with the reader. The reader believes you can be trusted." (39) It is a writer's responsibility to tell a story that highlights a pattern or an experience so a reader can learn from it. Authenticity can be reinforced by remembering that a story is the authority instead of the writer. The relationship between a writer and a reader begins with the writer's intentions for writing the story, way before the reader ever opens their book. When a writer assumes they have authority, they are robbing the reader of the value that is within the story. Lopez's perspectives on authenticity and authority are a way he is vigilant about his writing. He is attentive in his work to serve culture, communities, and readers. Writing is an outlet for Barry Lopez to live a life of service, to have an avenue to help other people.

The short story "Empira's Tapestry" in Lopez's book, *Outside*, is a good example of how Lopez strives to have the story as the authority and not mistake that he has authority as a writer. A woman named Empira weaves a vibrant and intricate tapestry of the Grand Canyon during her last year before cancer takes her life. Within the image formed by the tapestry, she weaves the words, "My holy and blooded desire... implausible as such a life can be... his hands tracing the bow of my back, his lips on the rim of my ear... bring my own children here, to find what I was given..." (86) These are "the words that [she] wrote the first morning after [she] was married"

(84). Of all the memories Empira could have shared with her friend in the story or thought about for hours while creating the tapestry, she chooses to recreate the image that she remembered vividly from her childhood. “I never forgot its breadth, how delicate the colors of the rocks and the sky and the trees were that hung in it. I wanted to fill that space up, to be inside it like a bird, graceful, rising, falling, flying long, winding spirals from the rim to a landing far below.” (84) Empira encounters the landscape when she was a child in the Grand Canyon with her parents and brothers.

The intimate details about Empira’s time at the Grand Canyon allow me to visualize her experience. Lopez’s description of a place goes beyond observing. He explains how the character interacts with a landscape through her wanting to be like a bird, to fill the space, instead of simply describing what she sees.

When I read “Empira’s Tapestry,” I was able to feel Empira’s emotional connection with the landscape. I felt like I was part of the story instead of a spectator. Lopez offers a story and doesn’t tell the reader how to interpret it, which lets me follow Empira through her last parts of her life.

Lopez mentions writing about his sexual abuse to Tydeman in an interview in *Conversations with Barry Lopez*. The interview led me to read Lopez’s essay published in 2013, “Sliver of Sky.” It is an essay recounting the sexual abuse he went through as a child. Why did he decide to write the story after years of struggling with addressing these childhood memories? He found himself connected to many other people that were abused as children. In the essay, Lopez describes his struggles that many other victims go through with their sexual identity. He was “haunted by a sense of contamination, a feeling that [he] had been rendered worthless as a man because of what [he] had done” (Lopez).

In an NPR interview with Terry Gross on the talk show, “Fresh Air,” Lopez explains why he wanted to write about such a traumatic time in his life. He said that he became impatient by newspaper articles suggesting that victims “were most interested in was winning a financial judgment or in punishing.” He thought that “what you [would] really want is for somebody to believe what happened, to take you at face value and not to manipulate you in a courtroom.” The time after the abuse is longer than the abuse itself. In his essay, Lopez says that he thought the act of the abuse would be the most horrific, when it was “the enduring horror that [he] had learned to accommodate brutalization.” Through his experience and his story, Lopez said that he was able to “empathize with another person’s nightmare.” He told Gross, “in order to write about it in the way that I thought I had to, which is, in the end it’s not about me, it’s about us.” On the NPR internet page for Lopez’s interview, there are over 100 comments in reply. One of which states, “So grateful for this man and his courage to tell a too common story.” Many of the comments exclaimed thank you to Lopez, and I’m sure many more were said by readers that didn’t comment. This is one of the many examples of how Lopez lives a life of service.

The Sowell Family Collection is housed here, at Texas Tech University. It is an assemblage of papers, manuscripts, and more about several natural world writers. Within the collection are journals, pictures, correspondents, and other objects that follow Lopez’s life. In a draft for a speech for the Oregon Book Awards in 1997, Lopez wrote about a meeting he had in Australia with several writers around the world. “We were all concerned for the fate of the reader” and “none of us felt we were authorities on anything except perhaps our own experience and our vision of that experience. Our common question seemed to be: How can we help?” The focus of the group was centered on the writers “trying to define the nature of community in the wake of the destruction wrought by colonialism, and in the face of what might be called hyper-

capitalism.” Lopez actively takes the writer’s role in society into account by writing stories to benefit people he knows and also ones he will never meet in communities around the world. He says that modern capitalism has an “emphasis on separating the individual consumer from the inclusive structure of the family.” Lopez writes to connect parts of unravelling communities together around the world through their shared experiences. He strives to know “how [he] can make [an] individual not feel stripped of dignity and a sense of self-worth” (Barry Lopez Speaking Engagement Papers 1971-1999 and undated, Box 1, Folder 37).

Lopez offers people stories about incredible and terrible experiences without them ever having to live through it in effort to help them. As a writer, he seeks to write about an event so a reader can feel like they are experiencing it firsthand, to learn what other people go through or that they’re not alone in their experiences. He has a gift that, as he says, can’t be taught, because no one has the power to change the reason why a person writes. (Barry Lopez Speaking Engagement Papers 1971-1999 and undated, Box 1, Folder 22). A writer can either understand that a story is the authority or falsely assume that they have the authority to change details to make their own story instead of the real one. His beliefs to leave authority with a story and bring together communities reinforce and guide his pursuance of helping others.

Reading Lopez’s stories, I am emotionally invested in the landscapes and characters he recounts or creates. His stories make me feel vulnerable, even though I have never lived through the same events as him or his characters. As I read, I feel an intimate connection, like I am walking with a close friend or remembering a fond memory. Like Lopez, I want to be able to write about my life in a way to help other people feel that they’re not alone. Barry Lopez uses his valuable talents as a writer to live a life of service for his readers.

Resources

Barry Lopez Speaking Engagement Papers, 1971-1999 and undated, Southwest

Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.

Lopez, Barry, Holstun, James Perrin. Warren, and Barry Moser. *Outside: Six Short Stories*. San Antonio: Trinity UP. Print.

___ . "In 'Sliver of Sky,' Barry Lopez Confronts Childhood Sexual Abuse." Interview by Terry Gross. *National Public Radio* 10 Jan. 2013. Web. 4 Apr. 2016.

___ . "Sliver of Sky: Confronting the Trauma of Sexual Abuse." *Harper's Magazine* Jan. 2013. Print.

Tydeman, William E. *Conversations with Barry Lopez: Walking the Path of Imagination*.

Norman: U of Oklahoma, 2013. Print.