Exploring a Fascination With the World

An Interview With Dan Gerber

By Jim Grinnell

I began corresponding with Dan Gerber in 1987 after reviewing his short story collection Grass Fires. During that exchange of letters, we discovered a common interest in more than serious literature. We were about the same age, we each had a daughter and son of similar ages, we each collected books (though on a very different economic scale), we each had grown up hunting upland game birds, and, most of all in the nonliterary world, we shared an interest in sports car racing.I had recently begun to write about vintage motorsports with the ostensible goal of earning money to upgrade a 1960 British sports car that I had neglected for years. Gerber had once raced cars of that era when they were new. While he had begun with a British marque—an Austin Healey—he had the wherewithal to move up quickly to Ferraris and then to Ford-powered Shelby Cobras, which remain to this day among the fastest sports cars ever built. A serious accident had foreshortened his career in 1966.

We exchanged visits: he to read at my local university and I to cover races in Michigan. He taught me quite a lot about racing history and showed me films of that earlier era. Then, in the mid-1990s, he moved to Key West, Florida, where, among other things, he was instrumental in turning the Key West Literary Seminar into one of the country's premier literary events. I last saw him there in 1996 dedicating a plaque to Wallace Stevens, but we have kept in touch. Always a supporter as well as a contributor to the contemporary literary scene—his long, close association with Jim Harrison is perhaps best known—Gerber continues to write from new homes in Idaho and California.

The following interview was conducted via telephone, e-mail, and Federal Express in July and August 2001.

The Bloomsbury Review: A Second Life *covers nearly three decades of your prose writing, from 1974 to 2000. Do you see this book as being analogous to a retrospective show of a visual artist's work after achieving a certain level of success and maturity? In other words, are you saying, "Let's look back at some of what I've done and see what I have become and am becoming"?*

Dan Gerber: Well, I hope, as a book, it's more than that. I hope it has some unifying bond or informing spirit, but yes, it is a retrospective, a bringing together of stories from almost three decades to see how they reflect in one another's light. I think of it as a memoir of sorts and also as an exploration.

TBR: *Let me ask a couple of sweeping questions. What do you see as your most significant literary success?*

DG: I can't pinpoint one most significant success. My natural inclination would be to think it's my most recent poem. I like the energy of my first novel, *American Atlas*. It was the best I could do at the time, though naturally, it seems immature to me now. I had to write it before I could write *Grass Fires* and *A Voice From the River*. I think if I went back and read those two books, I'd find passages I'd still feel good about. I like a lot of *A Second Life*, though I've been so immersed in putting it together that I don't have any kind of clear picture of it right now. I suspect that *Trying to Catch the Horses* is my best book of poems, but trying to pick one most significant work is like trying to choose a most significant child. I simply can't do it.

TBR: *Then let's go the other direction. What has been your major disappointment?*

DG: My greatest disappointment is that all the things I've made, I haven't made better. If I'd ever been completely satisfied with anything I'd written, I don't suppose I'd have bothered to write anymore. It's the hope of the great line, the great paragraph, the great discovery of something I don't know I know. I just need to write. It's my spiritual practice, my way of seeing.

TBR: *Let's begin at the beginning of this new book, that is, with the title. In the introduction you explain that the poet/writer leads a life of close observation and of contemplation. That life is "the first life," and for some writers it may be the only significant life. You go on to say that between the times of creative sparks, there is the quotidian business of daily life, and to avoid at least some of the mundane routine you have often sought out adventures. Be they auto racing, boat racing, sailing, African camera safaris, salt- and freshwater fishing trips, or arctic exploration, these experiences "have been my second life." Is it accurate to say that this book is a record of those adventures?*

DG: Certainly that's accurate. It is a record of those adventures, though I didn't know just what those adventures were or what their significance was till I wrote them. It would be more accurate, I think, to call it an exploration of my fascination with the world. That fascination is my weakness. I love this world of illusions.

TBR: *I first encountered your writing with the publication of your book of short stories,* Grass Fires, *in 1987. At that time you were living in Michigan near your family's business, near where you had grown up. Since then you have divorced and remarried, moved first to Key West, and later to Idaho and California. To*

Dan Gerber Book List:

Nonfiction:

Indy: The World's Fastest Carnival Ride (*Prentice Hall, 1974*)

A Second Life: A Collected Nonfiction (*Michigan State University Press, 2001*)

Novels:

American Atlas (*Prentice Hall, 1973*)

Out of Control (*Prentice Hall, 1974*)

A Voice From the River (*Clark City, 1990*)

Short Stories:

Grass Fires (*Winn Books, 1987*)

Poetry:

The Revenant (*Sumac Press, 1971*)

Departures (*Sumac Press, 1973*)

The Chinese Poems (*Sumac Press, 1978*)

Snow on the Backs of Animals (*Winn Books, 1986*)

A Last Bridge Home: New & Selected Poems (*Clark City, 1992*)

Trying to Catch the Horses (*Michigan State University Press, 1999*)

what extent has your post-Michigan existence been itself "a second life"?

DG: I'm not sure that the idea that our lives are a continuity isn't our greatest illusion. I find that there are moments or occurrences in our lives that tend to organize all the other events around them. The near-death experience of my crash at Riverside is one of those, and even more traumatic was my divorce from and the subsequent death of my wife of 31 years. These are points of departure around which you think of everything else as having happened before or after. A very positive point of departure has been my getting to know and my marriage to my best friend and the discovery that that can happen. Location, or more precisely landscape, has always been important to me. I tend to love most that place where I happen to find myself at the moment, and I discover that I often have an abiding melancholy or longing for the place I happen to be, I suppose because I just don't seem to be able to experience it quite deeply enough.

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TBR: *In the 1960s your nascent but successful sports car racing career ended with a near-fatal crash, but you suggest that your racing days were ending anyway. You quote Kierkegaard who said that the poet cannot do what the hero does. He—the writer—"can only rejoice in the hero." You seem to have accepted that dichotomy for more than 30 years by keeping your adventures less life-threatening. In 1999 you returned to racing, to vintage sports car racing, a sport that is still very dangerous because of the speeds and the structural rigidity of the older cars. Is this another "second life"? Does it signal any major change in your life view, or is it, as you say, just fun?*

DG: It's more than just fun. It's rediscovering some of the feelings of someone I once was, of doing something that scares me a little and discovering that I can still do it well, and of seeing how I look at a fairly dramatic and challenging kind of experience differently than I did when I was 26 years old. It's also the joy of renewing some friendships with people with whom I shared something quite special and dramatic a long time ago, when race drivers were more like barnstormers than test pilots. It's another way of exploring who I might be.

TBR: *One constant during the arc of your adult life has been your interest in and practice of Zen Buddhism.* Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance *notwithstanding, some would see a contradiction between Zen practices and motorcar racing. Is there? How do you reconcile such diverse activities?*

DG: No, I don't see racing as a contradiction of my practice of Zen, such as it is. Although the phrase has become such a cliché, now that we have the Zen of everything, you could say that racing is simply a kind of Zen in action. What, after all, is more self-conscious than Zen? Zen simply means meditation, being aware and letting go, and that's also what racing is, although the concentration in racing is a concentration rather dramatically enforced by the desire to stay alive—I knew a number of drivers who died from what we used to call "brain fade"—though racing lacks the discipline of Zen. It's pretty easy to concentrate when the things of the world are passing at close proximity at well over 100 miles an hour.

TBR: *Your 1994 essay "The Havana Wind" recounts a quasilegal boat trip to Cuba. In 2000 you wrote about a trip to the Arctic Circle and the beauty and fragility of the tundra. Both pieces are exceptionally effective. Yet, it seems to me that these essays and others offer the opportunity to make political statements—about the archaic, self-defeating policy our government has practiced against Cuba for 40 years and the need to preserve the delicate ecological web in the Far North. I'm quite sure you agree with these sentiments. In your view, when should a writer engage in politics while writing about other subjects?*

DG: I think that both the essays you mention are political statements. At least you were able to discern from them my feelings about our country's policies toward Cuba and the importance of the preservation of the arctic wilderness to the well-being of our soul-life, if not, in fact, simply our own continued existence. If you think of literature as news that stays news, and if you use it as a soapbox to attack a policy of the moment, you're creating something as ephemeral as that policy. Wordsworth makes an effective and enduring political statement in "The world is too much with us." That poem speaks to us even more clearly today than it did in 1802. If he had written a sonnet about Britain's policies toward France, it would be, at best, a curiosity. A lot of good writers ignore all they know about good writing when they try to sell something specific. When I want to be overtly political I write to my friends or my congressman or to the op/ed page.

TBR: A Second Life *ends with an extensive interview, one that allows for far more depth than space allows here. Were you aware that in three quarters of the three dozen or so questions that you answer there, you cite other writers to support your positions? In some cases, you allude to several in a single answer. While your references to other writers are both scholarly and erudite, it seems to me that with your output of a dozen books, you have every right to opine without so much literary support.*

DG: Being scholarly isn't my intention. I've picked up my knowledge as Frost posited a poet should: by wandering over a field and picking up, like burs, whatever sticks to him, by simply paying attention. When I pick my socks clean I've got a first-rate collection of burs, and one of my greatest pleasures is to bring them to the attention of others, or simply to throw them out there in hopes that some of these treasures I've gleaned might strike fire for someone else. Besides, it's the writers who came before me who nurtured my desire to write. Should I not refer you to a source? I, as an artist and an individual, have nothing to offer but the potential of seeing things and passing them along. And maybe, once in a while, in this practice of collection and cultivating, something that seems like new life may appear. In life I'm full of opinions, but in writing I don't have opinions so much as I have experience, and so much of that experience is in what

I've read. Should I ignore the great writers who came before me to make up an answer that might only be almost as good as what they have already said? Besides, it's just who I am. I love literature. I love wisdom and precision and imagination more than I love being original.

TBR: *And so was F. Scott Fitzgerald wrong when he said that there are no second acts in American life?*

DG: I think he was wrong. I might even go so far as to say that American life is all in second acts. The first act is simply a setup. ■

INTERVIEWER: In addition to contributing regularly to *The Bloomsbury Review* and other literary outlets, **Jim Grinnell** wrote about and participated in vintage sports car events for more than a decade. His automotive writing appeared in magazines such as *Autoweek* and *Vintage Motorsport*, and he wrote the biography *John Fitch: Racing Through Life*.