

## Renaissance Man, Western Writer

### An Interview With Robert Greer

By Jay Kenney

Like most writers, Robert Greer has a day job. Actually, he has several day jobs, a fact that has defined his writing life for the last 25 years. Greer is matter-of-fact, almost deprecatory, in the way he looks at and thinks about his success as a writer, editor, and publisher. Perhaps because he's been so successful in so many ways, his ability to juggle his many careers no longer astonishes him; but to the uninitiated, he remains a phenom: dentist, doctor, pathologist, medical school professor, medical researcher in cancers of the jaw and mouth, short story and novel writer, and founder and longtime editor of *High Plains Literary Review*. Were that not enough to make all but the very secure envious, he also reviews books for National Public Radio and runs a small cattle ranch in Steamboat Springs, Colorado.

He doesn't express amazement at how well he's done in this world; he shrugs it off. He began with midwestern roots in Columbus, Ohio, and Gary, Indiana, where his parents were teachers and school superintendents. In college he majored in zoology, chemistry, and journalism at Miami University (Ohio), and began a fledgling writing career as a journalist, interviewing visiting celebrities and sports stars. He graduated from college in 1965 and moved on to dental school at Howard University. At the height of the Vietnam War he was in the Coast Guard pulling shrapnel from the jaws of returning sailors. Upon discharge he earned a medical degree from Boston University, where he trained as a pathologist. He moved to Colorado in 1974 and took a job at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, eventually becoming a full professor of medicine, dentistry, and pathology and a medical researcher, and developing a private pathology practice. Tugged, perhaps, by his early writing experience, he began to write creatively and published short stories in journals as diverse as *South Dakota Review*, *AGNI*, *Metrosphere*, and *Writers' Forum*. In 1988 he took a one-year sabbatical from medicine and earned an MFA in creative writing from Boston University. From his fierce attachment to the American West and his profound dissatisfaction with the literary journals of the day, he founded *High Plains Literary Review* in 1986. With his wife Phyllis as the managing editor, Greer published and edited *High Plains* for 15 years, ceasing only on Phyllis' death in 2002.

Unhappy with the form of and limited market for short stories, he began writing a novel; the first of what would become the CJ Floyd series was published in 1996. *The Devil's Hatband* features an African American bail bondsman based in Denver, a crusty Vietnam vet who sometimes doubles as a bounty hunter. Set against the background of the American West, the

series eventually added *The Devil's Red Nickel* (1997) and *The Devil's Backbone* (1998). Not completely content with the CJ Floyd series, Greer added two medical thrillers, *Limited Time* (2000) and *Heat Shock* (2003). *Booklist* described reading Greer as "like being hooked up to an I.V. that steadily drips suspense." In 1999 he won the Chester Himes Black Mystery Award, given annually to a published black mystery writer.

When TBR caught up with Greer in March 2005 at his Denver office, he had just finished his fourth CJ Floyd novel, *Resurrecting Langston Blue*, to be published this fall by North Atlantic Books, which has also secured rights to the previous CJ Floyd mysteries and is bringing them back into print.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *What brought you to Colorado in the first place? Did you have family here?*

**Robert Greer:** No. They all lived in Columbus. But my wife was from out west. She was from L.A. That's part of what drove me to come west. It was almost like Horace Greeley. I wanted to see the West. I was always enchanted by the West and so was my wife.

**TBR:** *Before moving west in 1974, you'd gone to college, dental school, and medical school, and been in the Coast Guard. Was all that something your family expected of you?*

**RG:** Oh, yeah. People often ask, "How did you do all of this?"—especially since they were looking at a minority. I always said, "The same way other people in the majority population have expectations of their children." My dad was a superintendent of schools for the state of Ohio. When I was growing up he was a high school principal and my mom was an English teacher. Their expectations were that you would get an education to try and make it in this world, so that's where it came from. I have two brothers, and that's what was expected of all of us. One brother has a PhD from Stanford in International Relations. My other brother has a Doctor of Divinity degree.

**TBR:** *What was your service in the Coast Guard like?*

**RG:** I was in New Jersey, a Lieutenant Senior Grade. I was a dentist, did a lot of triage work. We would get guys coming back from Vietnam, and the first duty station they would hit would be us because it was the biggest Coast Guard base in the country. They would come there, and I would pick shrapnel out of their heads. When they repainted the Coast Guard boats, we knew we were in trouble. They used to be red, white, and blue with a very dramatic insignia on the front that said "United States Coast Guard." We walked into work one day, and the boats were all gray. They had no more colors or insignia. There were machine guns front and back. Then I went, "Hmm, I don't remember if I signed up for this duty."

**TBR:** *Was your experience in the service negative?*

**RG:** No, it was not. Absolutely not.

**TBR:** *You weren't out demonstrating against the war?*

#### A Current Robert Greer Book List

*Resurrecting Langston Blue*  
(North Atlantic Books,  
Fall 2005)

*The Devil's Hatband*  
(North Atlantic Books, 2004)

*Heat Shock*  
(Warner Books, 2003)

*Isolation and Other Stories*  
(Davies Group 2002)

*Limited Time*  
(Mysterious Press, 2000)

*The Devil's Backbone*  
(Warner Books, 1999)

*The Devil's Red Nickel*  
(Warner Books, 1997)

**RG:** By virtue of my training and background, I was assigned a job to do by the government, and that's the way I looked at most things. So I said, "Well, I'll go do my job." That's basically it. Other people had different jobs, and still other people were protesting, and some other people were getting killed. It was just the way the world was.

I was a dentist, and my job was to take care of teeth and to treat the people who were getting shot. I didn't think much about it at that time. Now I've had time to look back and wonder, "What did I see out there?" The people I saw were basically just doing their jobs. I didn't run into guys who wanted to go blow up Vietnamese buildings or bloodthirsty, crazy people or people who wanted to be heroes. I just ran into people like me.

**TBR:** *When did you start writing creatively?*

**RG:** When I was in high school, I read everybody I possibly could, and then when I got to college I started to write. But I never wrote fiction or anything like that. I wrote mainly journalism. I really didn't come back to it until I was in my late 30s, early 40s, and I started writing short stories.

**TBR:** *Did you ever work as a journalist?*

**RG:** I did, but not in the sense people would think of. When I was in college, I had a very good journalism professor, Gilson Wright, who somehow recognized that I had some underlying, well-hidden skills, because I don't think that I would have picked them up. He said, "Hey man, you write well enough to do this for a living." I said, "But that's not really what I want to do. I really want to write because I enjoy writing and I enjoy reading. I'm doing it because I'm trying to be educated, not because I want to have a job doing this." He said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Because of the kind of work you've turned in, I'm going to see if I can't get you some stories writing for newspapers." I was only 19, and he got me jobs writing for newspapers on local athletes and people like that, and eventually I got known. This started when I was probably a sophomore. By the time I was a senior I was doing feature stories for the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and the Dayton paper. I wrote feature stories on these people, and they turned out to be famous!

**TBR:** *Were there particular authors in high school and college that you wanted to emulate?*

**RG:** Sure. I always thought Mark Twain was an absolutely fabulous writer. Still do. He's already written the great American novel. *Huckleberry Finn* is just as good as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*; Twain's our Homer, just using the Mississippi River as a metaphor. When I was a kid I read Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Hemingway. Orwell I thought was great. I was mesmerized by Willa Cather writing about pioneer people in the West. I didn't even know what the West was growing up in Gary, Indiana. A woman writing about the West from her perspective intrigued me. I said, "God, her perspective really isn't written about a lot, and it's a woman's perspective." It just gets passed over.

**TBR:** *How did you make the jump to writing fiction?*

**RG:** I like short stories better than any other form. If I could write short stories and get the reputation or notoriety I get from writing my novels, I would. But you can't because

short stories are difficult to market. There's not a lot of money to be made, so publishers don't do many of them. I decided I wanted to write short stories because I was tired of reading the same story over again. Every time I picked up a literary magazine or *The New Yorker* or a slick magazine I was reading the same story, about somebody's angst in New York or some professor having to break up with his wife when he's going off with some college chick. It seemed to be a typical story in the literary magazines, although I will say that has passed. So I said, "I think I'll write some of my own short stories and start a literary magazine at the same time."

**TBR:** *Your short stories have a tremendous amount of detail about how western ranches work, about irrigation, about calving. Where did you learn about that?*

**RG:** My uncle, my mother's oldest brother, lived on the family farm they owned in Ohio. My mother's family all come from the land. They were all farmers. When I was a teenager, I would go from Indiana to my uncle's farm and work with my cousins. We would bring in crops. He had five or six cows out there, but it wasn't cattle ranching as we know it out West.

**TBR:** *How did you translate your Ohio experience to the West?*

**RG:** Well, now I have a ranch in Steamboat Springs. But it's really no different. The agricultural life, whether you're a farmer or a rancher, whether you're producing corn or soybeans or you're raising cattle, is very similar. And we always had some livestock around. So I had a good background. I enjoyed it.

**TBR:** *Did they have rodeo cowboys in Ohio?*

**RG:** No. You don't see rodeo cowboys there. Most of that comes from my experience here. Writing about rodeo cowboys and the real ranching that goes on here in the West comes from living in Colorado for 30 years. But when I came to Colorado, I already knew how to ride a horse. I think that's the difference.

**TBR:** *In your first CJ Floyd story, you pit a crusty old rancher against a radical environmentalist to explore a variety of environmental issues. Does global warming keep you up at night?*

**RG:** I think it is a serious issue, but it takes place over a much broader period of time than we tend to see. I think when you're living your life you get very myopic; you seem to think everything takes place on your watch. But it doesn't. Global warming has been going on since the Industrial Revolution, so that's a very long period of time. We're up against such a long-term problem that we have to approach the solution in those terms and not think that we can come up with a little solution that's going to take place in our limited life on this planet. If we think of it in the larger picture, we can come up with more significant solutions. I think everybody wants to do their part, but fragmented tiny solutions don't fix complex problems that have developed over a long period of time.

**TBR:** *Do you think of yourself as a Renaissance man?*

**RG:** People say that about me all the time. I don't know. A Renaissance man is a bigger nut than me. I would say I'm a person with a lot of varied interests.

**TBR:** *Tell me about the High Plains Literary Review.*

**RG:** I started it in 1986, and that was part of the story about why I started writing short stories. A friend of mine, Clarence Major, said, "Start your own magazine." I said, "How much does it cost?" He said you could run it for \$15,000 a year. And I said, "Are you kidding me? That's not very much money, if you're looking at what you get for it."

I decided that if I could write a grant for a half a million dollars to study cancer cells, I could certainly write a grant for \$10,000 to the National Endowment for the Arts. The rest of the money I raised from the local professional community. They're not as narrow as people might think. I found that doctors, lawyers, and accountants read as much as you do, and maybe more. You'd be surprised at how much they know about literature. Now, interestingly enough, this was a hard fundraising concept to get across to my literary colleagues. They did not see people the same way I did, because they didn't rub shoulders with them. They said, "They're only interested in their own thing." It took a lot of convincing. The *High Plains* supporters were absolutely wonderful. They weren't just in court all day long or delivering babies. They thought I had a great idea, and they wanted to read more.

**TBR:** I keep hearing rumors that you may be starting up again.

**RG:** After my wife died—she was the managing editor as well—for two years I couldn't see the wall. It's two and a half years now; still, some days, I wake up and the first thing I do is cry. If I can get beyond that and get my life organized so I'm not working on a time crunch that's going to kill me, we will start back up. I'm hoping we'll be able to do it next year. I've called some of my old editors and told them to get ready.

**TBR:** Do you think the literary review scene is different now than it was when you started *High Plains Literary Review*?

**RG:** Absolutely. First, there's a lot more glitz. There's a magazine called *Glimmer Train*, for instance, that some wealthy women decided to found to publish short stories and poetry and essays. It's got lots of money behind it. They pay \$500 a story, if not more. There are more vehicles like that around. Literary magazines used to be largely a vehicle of universities. There were a few private ones, a few outside of university walls, but not a lot. And now there clearly are many more, and they're private, outside of academia. That gives a whole different slant to the literature.

**TBR:** Do the rise of the Internet and the availability of online journals change the way you think about *High Plains*?

**RG:** Not really. I still think that the people who read literary magazines want to see it in print. These are people who want to hold the newspaper or the literary magazine in their hands. The top-quality magazines are not going to be exclusively on the Internet because readers don't want to read the screen.

**TBR:** Which reviews and journals out there today do you like?

**RG:** George Plimpton was a friend of mine. We'd known each other for quite a while, and I always respected what he did with *The Paris Review*. I think they've got their own set of problems now, trying to keep it going. *The Georgia*

*Review* is as good as you get, and it still mirrors the great southern writing that's out there. I think *TriQuarterly*, out of the Midwest, is an outstanding literary magazine as well. *The Antioch Review* is still a good literary magazine. *Zyzzyva*, which is on the West Coast, is a fabulous literary magazine, run by Howard Junker, who started it about the same time we started *High Plains*. He's been very successful. *Ploughshares* is another very good one out of Boston.

**TBR:** You've got a new book coming out?

**RG:** Yes, it's a CJ Floyd mystery. A little different than the ones he typically does. In my last novel, *Heat Shock*, there was a woman named Carmen Nguyen—half black and half Vietnamese, a product of the Vietnam War. In the last scene of the book she tells her boyfriend that she's going to look for her father who's been missing since the war was over. In the new book she hires CJ Floyd to find her father who's been missing for 35 years. It's a mystery with heavy political overtones to it.

**TBR:** Carmen Nguyen is one of your characters I would describe as decidedly outside the mainstream. But you've got others: Dittier Atkins and Morgan Williams, street people who were once authentic cowboys.

**RG:** They're in the new novel, *Resurrecting Langston Blue*. Dittier is deaf and mute. They're old rodeo cowboys who were famous and have fallen on hard times. All of the characters are quite a bit different. CJ has a partner now, a black woman who works for him, Flora Jean Benson, a former Marine intelligence officer. I try to create different kinds of characters.

**TBR:** They are not necessarily alienated, but they're certainly out of the mainstream and kind of the "other." Was that your experience growing up?

**RG:** Not really. I didn't really grow up thinking I was out of the mainstream, but I was always a loner. I've often said to people that it wouldn't have mattered what my ethnic background was; I would have been a loner, period. That's just my personality. I guess it comes from my parents. They always wanted me to add something to society that was more than hype, something as you pass along. My wife was very much the same way.

**TBR:** You've been credited with opening up the detective genre to African Americans and non-whites, and are compared to Walter Mosley. Do you see yourself that way?

**RG:** I definitely don't see it that way, but I'm not offended by it. It is always great to get accolades. I actually hope that people see me doing something broader than that. Along the way, I probably have opened up detective fiction to an audience that may not have seen these characters before, but my canvas is the West. When I'm writing, I'm writing from a sense of place that doesn't get the same exposure that things east of the Hudson get. That's part of why I write. I want to write about where I live and the places I love. I want to open up that topography to the reader as well. Certainly I want to open up the black experience to the reader. I want to open up the experience of people who are, like you said, the "other," people who are like Carmen. She's Amerasian, and she's got a

whole different experience than white America or black America or Hispanic or Latin America. I think it is narrow to say it's only detective fiction about black America. It certainly deals with the black experience, but I hope I'm better and broader than that. ■

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