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## Dr. David Baker: Professional Amateur

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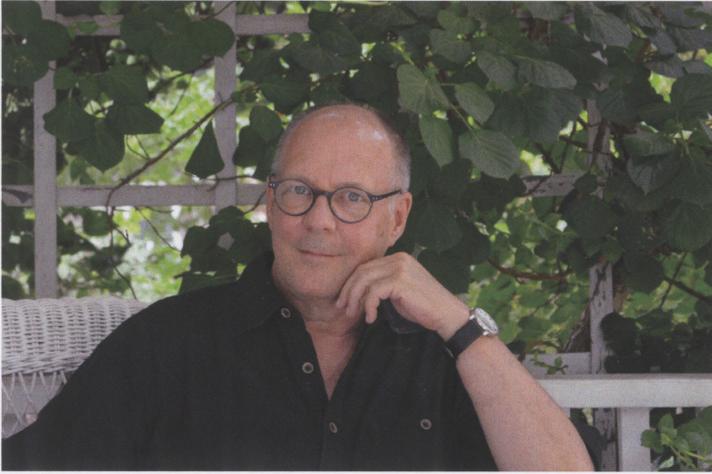
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Dr. David Baker: Professional Amateur

Riley Halpern



**You've been at Denison since 1984—nearly 40 years—and I was hoping we could start with you speaking a bit about your time here.**

I love the amateur-ness of undergraduate school. That's why I teach here. I don't like the professionalization of poetry and of writing and of literature. I think all the time about how I can continue to put myself in the position of a really engaged amateur and keep thinking "I don't know what I'm doing" or "I don't know how to do this thing" rather than trying to get good at a thing and then just doing that forever.

And I didn't think I would be here that long. I'm a little town guy, so I love the village, I like the size of the school, and I'd never been to a school like this—except for Kenyon. I was always at big universities, and I just made a home here. I had opportunities to go other places, and for one reason or another, it just made more sense to stay. Honestly, I'd never heard of Denison, and then this job opened here and somebody said, "You should definitely go check this place out." The department was active and progressive and there was this creative writing track—I was really attracted to that, and I had the opportunity to do the two things I really like; I didn't just want to teach creative writing, and I didn't just want to teach literature. I could do *both* here. It's really been rewarding to develop programs and

develop classes, and I have really good friends in the department. The department's been, for the most part, really congenial and friendly and supportive, and that matters more to me than the kind of relative prestige of a place. Just living a good life.

**What about the arc of your own poetry and your journey as a poet?**

That is a good question, and I am the wrong person to ask because I'm looking at it only from the inside, but I'll answer. I can see things that have changed. I'm a less linear narrative guy. I'm more innovative or experimental in form and syntax and language, though the narrative is still the heart of my poems; there is always a drama whether it's a big one or a little one or it's a human one or a not human one. But that—that's fundamental. I've written great big poems and I've written little poems and I've written poems in rigid forms and poems that are just splayed and pulled apart all over the place, trusting that there's a thing like an imagination or a soul that will hold it all together. These will be mine whether they look alike or whether they all sound alike or not, there's a thing deep in them that has a signature. And that you just kind of trust. It's the decisions you make almost in the subconscious or in the discovery of a poem—it goes a place you didn't know it was going to go—that's *really* you, more than anything else.

**The poems in your forthcoming collection, *Whale Fall*, are dynamic in the way they move back and forth across the page, and you make use of the white space more often than not. Both that movement and spaciousness are particularly noticeable in the untitled pieces that close each section of the collection. Have you always been drawn to that sort of movement and the possibility the white space allows?**

Thirty years ago, my [poems] looked pretty tight. But I wrote a long poem and began to work with white space and with two voices—I was just beginning to think about movement on the page. But really what's happened is Page. She's a museum nut. And when we first started to see each other fifteen years ago, we would go to museums and we both got really interested in abstract expressionism and in paintings where there was some language embedded. Cy Twombly does this stuff with movement and language, with what looks like writing but isn't, and I started to try to figure out what would suit my own imagination and have some kind of dynamic visual component as well as a mathematical or musical component. Page has a certain kind of adventurousness with language and with art that was contagious to me. And I decided to try to go there more.

It's possible to think of poetry as all of the arts. There's a dance component, there is a theater component, there's definitely a painting component, a musical component, and that's *really* interesting to me.

The whole book is about sound and echo, the way the whales listen to each other or talk to each other or locate themselves. So, each section ends with this sort of bounce back. The section ends, then there's a blank page, then there's this reverberation that responds... [The echos' lines] are all ten syllables [across the page with a space break in the middle of each line]. It pulls the blank verse line apart. I like to do a thing and then dissolve it. Or disguise it. Or let it erode—that's what it really is.

**Have you noticed any shifts in Denison students' poetry over the last four decades that align or diverge from the way American poetry has shifted over that same time?**

The quality of Denison students has gotten better. It's a more demanding admissions process, and you can see that. That tends to produce students who are good at school. But Denison students have read *way* less than students forty years ago, and even students writing poems now have never read Whitman or John Donne or Keats or Emily Dickinson or Sappho. Current students' definition of an older poet may be somebody like Ada Limón, but it goes back farther than that. The students now are adventurous and shy, intellectually, to show too much of themselves—they're protective, that's always the case—they're very fluent in some kinds of music and poetry. There's a kind of limitation to reading, now, but because the students are so good, they can be brought up to speed with a sort of patience.

**How can editors help young aspiring writers?**

It really depends on the writer. New writers tend to be very possessive of their voice. You have to figure out who's receptive and who's not and what they need to know. One of the interesting things about editing is that it's completely different from writing. Because it's not about you, the editor. It's only going to be as good as the work people send you, and you are completely dependent on that work to make a wonderful thing. So you're more of a shaper than a creator. You have to get out of your own way and learn what a piece is doing and go to it on its own terms.

**What do you see as the value of undergraduate literary journals?**

I love that there are many of them. Writers write to be read, not just to do homework, and it's important to have an expression and forum for that, like *Exile*. It's great professional and aesthetic

training for the editors; when you edit somebody's work, it really rubs off on your own work. When you tell somebody five times, "Those images don't make sense," when you sit down with your own work again, you think, "Hm, maybe that doesn't make sense." So to have the community, to have the forum, to have the experience, and for students to learn how to basically submit, it's really good. It's a lucky thing.

**What's next for you after Denison?**

I have so much stuff I want to do, but I would implode if I weren't teaching. I *love* teaching. So we've worked out this thing where I teach a couple of courses every spring until I want to stop. So I teach two classes and then I'm off for eight months. It's pretty sweet. I have this book coming out, and I'm all over the place this coming fall, doing stuff for the book, and I have the time to do that. And I have, especially over the last twenty years, turned down invitations to do guest faculty things. But going forward, I have time to do that stuff. And travel. I want to keep writing poems, but there's also a book I want to write that I've never had time to write. And I'm dying to do that. And now I can.

**Your newest book of poems, *Whale Fall*, is set to be released mid-July. What should we know about this collection?**

Again, I'm the wrong person to ask, but this is my favorite book. Everything I know how to do, I did in this book. There's a two-line poem and an eighteen-page poem—it does a lot of movement. But it's, to me, the most coherent book—it really makes sense—and it is the most activist book I've ever written about environmental custody. But it's also really personal; it's about an illness that I've had for twenty years that I've never written much about. So all that's webbed in there together. This book has a different feel to me [than my past books]. This one has size to it that I really like. I just hope people find it.

**What is some advice you can give to aspiring writers?**

First of all, get out of your own way. And at the same time, be your best advocate. Here's the hard thing: for real writers, the thing you're writing, it's not about you. That's the main thing: it's not about you. Your job is to take that thing and make it as fantastic as you can. It's like being a mother; this thing begins completely in you, this fetus, like the idea you have to write a poem. But the process of pregnancy is the process of putting something that's going to be independent into the world. And then it's born and it takes steps on its own and it goes places without you. That's what it's like.