

IN STEP WITH INDIANA AUTHORS...
FEATURING AN INTERVIEW WITH
MATTHEW BRENNAN

by David Vancil



MATTHEW BRENNAN



Matthew C. Brennan, a poet and a teacher of English at Indiana State University, has been a resident of Terre Haute, Indiana, since 1985. Although born in St. Louis, he attended college, not in Missouri, but at Grinnell College in Iowa for his undergraduate degree and the University of Minnesota for his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. Matt, as he prefers to be called, played

baseball for Grinnell and remains a devoted fan of the game. Growing up and in the summers while he was in college, Matt had many part-time jobs, for example, working as a clerk in an office and as a laborer in a factory. While finishing his doctorate, he was employed as an editor by a textbook publisher.

Matt has been married twice and has a son by his first marriage, Daniel, who sometimes figures in his writing. Additionally, Matt is a critic of literature and culture. He has published several books of criticism as well as three volumes of poetry. Prevailing themes in his poetry are his relationship to nature and the importance of family life. While he might have earned an MFA and devoted himself completely to poetry, Matt indicates in an online article found on Biography Resource Center, a database provided by Thompson-Gale, that he decided to follow the more traditional scholarly approach because he felt he needed to learn more about literature in order to be a better writer. At Indiana State University, Matt enjoys teaching courses on the English Romantic period and popular culture. He is also an integral member of the creative writing faculty, teaching introductory and advanced poetry writing.

Matt's wife, Beverley Simms, a pianist and music professor at Indiana State University, is a direct descendant of Civil War-era Southern writer William Gilmore Simms, who was enormously popular in his day. Matt became interested in Simms and is, in fact, now writing a book on this storyteller and poet, which he hopes general readers will enjoy as much as scholars.

Matt is justifiably proud of his poetry books, *Seeing in the Dark* (with cover art by his son), 1993; *The Music of Exile*, 1998; and *American Scenes: Poems on WPA Artworks*, 2001. All three have received good notices, and the most recent book, *American Scenes*, is particularly noteworthy because it was inspired by an Indiana State University collection of art—drawings completed as a program of the Works Project Administration of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt presidency.

Recently, Dr. Brennan was honored to learn that one of his poems will be included along with those of other Hoosier poets on public buses in Indianapolis. A reading on an Indianapolis city bus of selected poems was scheduled for mid-August.

In the following brief interview, Matt reveals current activities and plans for the future:

Vancil: What are some of the current writing projects which you hope to publish?

Brennan: Right now I'm juggling three potential books: another collection of poems, including some WPA-inspired poems, entitled "The Gargoyle"; an as yet unnamed study of the poetry of the prolific antebellum Southern writer William Gilmore Simms, which attempts to restore him to prominence alongside American Romantic poets such as William Cullen Bryant and Ralph Waldo Emerson; and "The Sea-Crossing of Saint Brendan," a version in modern verse of a 9th-century Latin prose narrative about the Irish monk Brendan's voyage to the Promised Land, which many believe was actually Newfoundland. During my last sabbatical I wrote much of the Brendan poem on the Beara peninsula in southwest Ireland. Uncannily, it turned out to be the diocese of St. Brendan.

Vancil: That's an impressive number of varied projects, both critical and creative. Do you find that combining critical and creative projects beneficial, or would you prefer to concentrate on writing only poetry?

Brennan: I'm of two minds about this. I'm a poet at heart, but I love to write about literature I am moved by. All writing becomes by a creating out of chaos, an ordering of reality, and this act of mind is inherently

imaginative, to some extent. When I'm writing criticism, though, I feel I'm missing something; I don't feel this lack when writing poems. It's easier to write and to publish scholarship. To write a good poem, lightning has to strike, as Randall Jarrell said. Besides providing a means to keep writing when the Muse is uncooperative, doing scholarship helps me discover my place in the tradition, and it deepens my connection to literature, which I find essential to writing poetry. If I hadn't written about the poetry of William Wordsworth and the paintings of J. M. W. Turner—the topic of my doctoral dissertation—I don't think I'd have found my poetic identity. In turn, if I hadn't studied in England and experienced the light and landscapes that these two Romantics transform in their works, I doubt I'd have been pulled toward them as an academic interest.

Vancil: Does teaching others to write better help you in some way as a writer?

Brennan: Yes, I think it does. Teaching makes you more conscious of how language and art work, and it's inspiring when a young writer comes up with something truly imaginative or well-phrased. Though most student works are naturally derivative, every term the workshops give birth to many original poems. It makes me want to return the favor.

Vancil: Only a few versifiers such as Rod McKuen ever seem to have made a substantial living from writing verse or poetry. What keeps you writing and publishing in the face of a limited readership?

Brennan: Well, I write primarily for myself. Writing is as personal and private an act as we humans can engage in. But would I keep writing if I had no readers at all? I think I would. Robert Graves said there's no money in poetry, but also no poetry in money. He's pointing out that the purity of poetry is part of its appeal. The acts of writing and revising poems are liberating and fulfilling in a way that writing ads, for instance, is not; we somehow integrate all our disparate parts in writing poems, which makes us whole, for a moment anyway. That's payment enough. But if someone later reads your poem and gains from it, that's an unanticipated bonanza that can encourage you to wait in the rain for the next lightning strike.

Vancil: It's possible more people might read poetry if they were exposed to it as part of everyday activities. You have a poem that is going to be part of the Shared Spaces/Shared Voices project in Indianapolis. How will that work?

Brennan: The Arts Council of Indianapolis has arranged with IndyGo, the city bus system, to display individual poems of selected writers on three buses each. So the voice of each poet literally shares public space with passengers riding through the streets of Indianapolis. My poem, "Downtown at Dusk," like the

others, had to consist of fewer than sixty words. So, someone riding just a block or two has time to read it. The Council also plans to publish the poems in a catalogue as well as online.

Vancil: You seem genuinely happy with your role as a Hoosier poet. Do you have any parting remarks you'd like to leave with our readers?

Brennan: Our technologically fast-paced, media-obsessed culture leads many to declare that poetry is a dying art. But it's really never been more popular—and never needed more. Maybe the brevity of some poems makes poetry the ideal art form for our times. Reading a poem a day can do wonders for the soul. Here, in fact, is a short poem from my 1993 book *Seeing in the Dark* called "Hope":

*Suddenly, my son and niece laughing
from another room: a car's high beams bobbing
through light rain and sleet on a dark
road, past midnight, far from home.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Vancil is the head of the Special Collections Department in the library of Indiana State University. He curates numerous important collections, including the Cordell Collection of Dictionaries and the Debs Collection. Vancil, who has a Ph.D. in English, also writes and publishes criticism, creative prose, and poetry. David, his wife, Linda, and a 10-year-old daughter enjoy spending time together and with a couple of zany family pets.

