

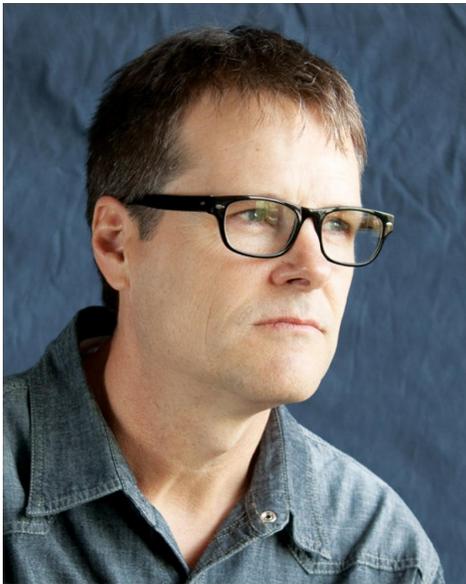
Poetry in the personal

Prize-winning poet returns to his East Texas roots in 'Gravel and Hawk'

By: Aaron Brand —*Texarkana Gazette*

"There's no money in poetry, and I think that's one of the best things about it."

—Nick Norwood



For much of his writing career, poet and Northeast Texas native Nick Norwood avoided the personal narrative in his work.

Instead, the gifted writer of "The Soft Blare" and "A Palace for the Heart," looked outside the self for much of his poetic inspiration, to rural landscapes or subjects like King Ludwig II.

His new book, due to be published in April by Ohio University Press, returns Norwood's poetic gaze to his East Texas roots and the Texarkana

area for subject matter.

"It felt good because it felt honest," Norwood, a 1980 Texas High graduate, said earlier this week about focusing his craft on more personal realms.

Norwood, 49, and an English professor at Columbus State University in Georgia, will see "Gravel and Hawk," his new volume of poems, published this year as winner of the annual Hollis Summers Poetry Prize.

Norwood is proud of his first two books of poetry, but his approach there was not one he wanted to continue.

"This new book is more honest and more sincere," he said. "That's what I set out to do. I feel more confident that I've come close to representing who I am."

He explains that a conversation he had with fellow poet Arthur Sze about writing poems that are central to a person struck a chord with him. Irony, observed Norwood, has been the default mode of post-modernism.

"I was just sick of that and I thought that, on the one hand, it was sort of evasive. I wanted to go for sincerity in these poems and that sort of fit the idea of writing poems about myself," Norwood said.

He's been writing poetry seriously for about 25 years, and he discovered, with this new focus, that a part of himself he sought to escape is actually "central to who I am."

"To put that in a more concrete way, being from rural East Texas, that was what I thought I wanted to escape," Norwood said.

The act of writing these poems for the past five years, though, makes him want to embrace those East Texas roots. It also helped him rethink what's possible with the personal narrative.

"I guess I understand the whole idea of writing about yourself differently now," said Norwood, who was born in De Queen, Ark. His dad used to deliver Lance crackers there.

Specifically, Norwood's roots are in the farmland and rural roads of territory stretching from Paris, Texas, to Texarkana and nearby. His father also flew pipeline patrol and worked in the oil fields in north central Texas.

"In flying pipelines, you basically fly

over pipelines and looks for leaks," Norwood said.

His dad, Richard Gaylon Norwood, died doing just that when Nick was just a child, which he memorializes in the beautiful, heartfelt and yet elegant poem "A.M.," where he pictures his father, six months before his death, singing along to the radio and songs by Patsy Cline or Bob Wills.

In his new book, Norwood writes vividly and with concrete, true detail about lives forged here in East Texas.

His mother later remarried and the family ultimately settled in Texarkana, Nick finishing his 9th grade year at the Pine Street school before moving on to Texas High. He first got a taste of collegiate life at Texarkana College and wrote for the newspaper there before moving on.

"If I'm a regional writer, that's my region," Norwood said about his East Texas upbringing. It feels like home, and writing the book brought him back to these roots.

All the same, there's a tension with this home territory, he observed, noting that many people identify with a Texas attitude about life but are also appalled by what Texas stands for, in a sense. For a writer, that tension is territory to mine.

"Tension is always good in writing," Norwood said.

He identifies with the region, but he also feels like an outsider, in a way, in relation to the mainstream political and cultural views here.

"What's different about the new book is that I think I understand that better," Norwood said.

His father is buried in Clarksville,

Texas. His uncle, Jack Smith, for a long time worked in the highway department in the area. His mother, stepfather and sister all live in Texarkana, as well as some of his longtime friends.

Eschewing the personal narrative earlier in his career, Norwood believes, helped him with the craft of poetry, making for better poems now. That initial resistance served him well.

"It forced me to find material in other places and to learn how to use it. It forced me to incorporate research into my work," he said.

"The Soft Blare" was a book of short lyrics influenced by poets like Wallace Stevens, Mark Strand and Richard Howard. "I was going for sort of a musical quality," Norwood said.

"A Palace for the Heart" was actually influenced by a childhood trip to Germany. In the "mad" King Ludwig II, he discovered a fascinating historical figure who created famous castles that Norwood was able to tour.

"He's a really romantic figure. He was a big supporter of the arts," said Norwood, whose poems in that book are dramatic monologues of characters surrounding Ludwig.

He wrote those poems while a doctoral student at Arizona State University, where his studies focused on Southwestern literature.

Norwood received his master's degree in literature from the University of North Texas and a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Texas-Arlington. He briefly worked in advertising, and he also taught in Abilene.

For this upcoming volume of poems,

the poet Mark Halliday judged the poetry prize submissions and selected Norwood's work. Norwood is excited to see "Gravel and Hawk" in print and looks forward to doing readings from the book.

For poets, such prizes and publication are truly a treasure. It's not as if there's much money in poetry.

"I think that it's important for the culture to have one art that is not corrupted by money and popular taste, not that I'm against money and not that I'm against forms of popular entertainment," Norwood said, adding he's a fan of "Downton Abbey" on TV. He calls it "really high-class chocolate."

But for poets, what's special about their craft is the art of it, not what it puts in the bank. Press runs for poetry books often run to just a couple thousand copies.

"There's no money in poetry, and I think that's one of the best things about it," Norwood said.

(On the Net: ohioswallow.com/book/Gravel+and+Hawk.)

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